

Livelihood Transitions and Coping With Shocks: Women in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Sector Coping With COVID-19

Working Paper

3 January 2022

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Acknowledgement: This study was funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Department of the Government of the United Kingdom.

1. Introduction: Lives and Livelihoods in the Time of COVID-19

One of the challenges that have been posed by COVID-19 is the trade-off between lives and livelihoods. *The Financial Times* once wrote about it as a macro-level issue in an article headed “The Covid-19 conundrum: lives versus livelihoods,” where it spoke of the difficult choices facing policymakers about whether they should prioritize public safety or open up their economies, the health of their citizens or the health of their economies (Dodd, 2020).

The relationship between lives and livelihoods has also been a concern at lower levels of analysis, in the daily lives of real people. At this level, however, it is very clear that the relationship has not been a uniform one. Instead, it is mediated by workers’ positions in the hierarchical structures that characterize labour markets across the world. In the context of the COVID-19 economy, we can distinguish between different groups in the population based on how they experienced the relationship between lives and livelihoods.

First, there is the small group of people who make up the richest 1% in the world and own around 50% of their wealth (Hardoon, 2015). They do not themselves engage in the labour market but rely on the labour efforts of others. The relationship between lives and livelihoods is unlikely to feature much in their concerns; on the contrary, most appear to have become wealthier over the course of the pandemic without any risk to their lives (Neghaiwi, 2021).

Then there were those who were fortunate enough to be able to continue working from the safety of their homes. According to a study carried out by Berg et al. (2020) when the crisis hit, around 30% of North American and Western European workers fell into this category, but only 6% of workers in sub-Saharan Africa and 8% in South Asia shared the same fortune. The international distribution of this category of workers and the study’s references to access to broadband internet and ownership of personal computers as preconditions for working from home made it clear that it was not talking about the kind of home-based piece work or industrial outwork that poorer women in the Global South were typically engaged in.

A third category was made up of those who were classified by their governments as “essential workers” and who were required to continue to work throughout the pandemic despite the heightened risk to their health and lives. These were mostly health workers, who faced the greatest risk given their face-to-face contact with infected people, but also a range of other workers who carried out the basic services considered necessary for daily life to be sustained, such as garbage collection, postal and delivery services, pharmacies, and groceries. The trade-off between lives and livelihoods was very real for them but they did not have the choice of opting out of their livelihoods to protect their lives.

Then there was a fourth category of workers whose work was not considered necessary to keep essential services going and who had to stop working in the face of lockdown and other restrictive measures. However, the loss of livelihood did not have a uniform effect on the lives of these “inessential” workers. Lives were less affected, and the effects of the trade-off attenuated if they were in formal jobs with the benefits of mandatory social protection. Among the rest in informal jobs, access to some form of social assistance during the pandemic provided protection from destitution, even if it

did not compensate for the loss of earnings. However, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), 55% of the world's population did not benefit from any form of social protection at all (ILO, 2017). These workers, mainly informal workers in the Global South, had to cope with the crisis on their own. For these workers, lives and livelihoods were almost indistinguishable. They had to feed themselves and their family from what they earned: their livelihoods *were* their lives.

In an earlier report, we examined the experiences of domestic workers in Bangladesh, a group that fell into the final subcategory within the “inessential worker” category, informal workers with no access to social protection and largely ignored during the crisis. In this paper, we examine in detail the experiences of a small group of workers from the export-oriented ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh and how they coped with the shocks and disruptions associated with COVID-19. These workers would, strictly speaking, fall into the first subcategory in our fourth category of workers, “inessential” formal workers with access to mandatory social protection but, as we will see, the reality was one of considerable variation in the kind of benefits they enjoyed. The experiences of the pandemic varied considerably across the RMG workforce.

The paper is organized into five sections. **Section 2** draws on the existing literature to provide the background to our study. **Section 3** describes our research methodology and sketches out a conceptual framework integrating livelihoods, capitals, and capabilities in order to organize our empirical analysis. **Section 4** reports on our main findings, dividing them into livelihood strategies before the lockdown, coping strategies during the lockdown, post-lockdown work trajectories, and their views about the trade-off between lives and livelihoods. **Section 5** offers some concluding policy reflections.

2. Background to the Study

2.1. The Export Garment Industry in Bangladesh

According to estimates by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA),¹ the number of garment factories in Bangladesh rose from 384 factories in the mid-1980s to over 4,000 in 2015. Its share of the country's exports was 84% at the start of the pandemic and 20% of its gross domestic product (GDP) (Antara, 2020b). It has become the world's largest exporter of garments after China.

Almost from the outset, the industry favoured a female workforce. While this is the pattern in garment value chains across the world, in countries like Bangladesh, where *purdah* norms resulted in extremely low female labour participation rates, especially in work outside the home, it represented a radical break with tradition. It allowed women with some minimum level of education to take up regular paid employment outside their homes, a major improvement from the unpaid family labour and casual wage labour available to them previously (Kabeer, 2000).

Unlike some other garment-exporting countries, domestic entrepreneurs dominated the industry from the early years. As one of the most important sources of foreign exchange for the country, the industry

¹ www.bgmea.com.bd/

has benefited from various forms of support to help it compete in the international market, but largely at the expense of its workers. Unions were suppressed in the export processing zones and discouraged outside them. Minimum wages, first set in 1994, were low and remained largely unchanged for over a decade until workers took to the streets in 2006 to demand an increase.

A Labour Law was passed in 2006 which was intended to consolidate and update 25 different pieces of legislation that had, till then, dealt with labour conditions in the country (Mahmud & Kabeer, 2006). Among other provisions, the law required the setting up of workers' participation committees (WPCs), half of whom could be either nominated by union leaders or elected by workers. The WPCs were made up of representatives of both management and workers and intended to provide a platform for social dialogue, particularly important in the absence of trade unions. In practice, these appeared to have been mainly nominated by employers (International Federation for Human Rights [FIDH], 2008).

Despite frequent, and frequently serious, industrial accidents, there was little attempt to enforce safety standards until the massive disaster at Rana Plaza, which led to the death of over 1,000 workers and the injury of many more. This brought international pressure to bear on the key actors in the garment value chain. The ILO initiated a National Tripartite Plan of Action, which later was joined by the United States and Canada, and a Sustainability Compact was launched in July 2013 (Better Work, 2019).

Two multi-stakeholder initiatives were put in place as a collaboration among employers, buyers, and unions to improve health and safety in the factories. One was the larger, and largely European, Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the other smaller, US-initiated Alliance for Bangladesh Workers' Safety.

Within the country, the Bangladesh government adopted a National Tripartite Plan of Action for Fire and Structural Integrity and passed the Labour (Amendment) Act 2013 to make trade union registration easier, improve health and safety regulations, and upgrade labour inspections (Kabbeer et al., 2020). Amendments were made to the 2006 Bangladesh Labour Act to improve occupational safety and health (OSH) standards through the creation of health and safety committees in each factory. The amendment also required the open election of workers' representatives to WPCs. The Accord agreement, which was supposed to end in 2018, was later extended to 2021.

While women have long made up the majority of the garment workforce, they tend to have lower levels of education than men and remain crowded into lower-paid and less skilled categories of work; consequently, the wage differentials between male and female workers have persisted over time (Huq, 2019; Kabbeer et al., 2004; Mastura & Teng, 2020). There has been a steady decline in women's share of the workforce from over 85% in the 1980s and 1990s to around 64% in 2009 (Lopez-Acevedo & Robertson, 2012). This partly reflects the rising importance of knitwear and partly the move into higher value items that use more capital-intensive technology.

2.2. The Unfolding of the Pandemic

2.2.1. The Impact on Employment

The first case of the virus was reported on 8 March 2020. The government announced a 10-day countrywide lockdown on 25 March, subsequently extending it in stages to 25 April. However, the outbreak of the pandemic in the countries to which Bangladesh supplied its garment exports meant that

cancellations of orders by international buyers began sometime before the pandemic registered in Bangladesh itself. Factories began closing and laying off workers. By the end of April, the BGMEA reported the cancellation of USD 3.18 billion worth of orders from 1,150 factories, affecting approximately 2.28 million workers (Kelly, 2020; UNB, 2020).

There was a lack of consensus during this period among the three key actors within the industry, the government, trade unions, and factory owners, with regard to whether factories should be kept open or closed as well as what the impact had been so far on the workers. A meeting between the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE), factory owners, and union leaders had led to the decision to keep factories open with appropriate precautions. But the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati (BGWS or Garment Workers Solidarity) demanded the closure of all factories with full wages on 20 March (“Shut Down RMG Factories Right Away: Demands Garment Sramik Sanghati,” 2020). In a joint statement, they said that workers did not have the facilities in the workplace that would keep them safe.

Immediately afterwards, another meeting was held with 70 unions. Some trade unions, like Sramik Karmochari Oikya Parishad (SKOP), were in favour of keeping factories open with proper health and safety measures, but with full payment of wages if it was necessary to close the factories. Others, like the Garment Sramik Odhikor Andalan (Garment Workers’ Rights Movement), asked for a 14-day shut down on full pay. Even within the BGMEA, there was disagreement about whether factories should close or not.

Finally, on 25 March, simultaneously with the announcement of the lockdown, the government also announced a major bailout/stimulus package of BDT 5,000 crore (the equivalent of EUR 530 million) for export-oriented industries to mitigate the impact of the Coronavirus on the country’s economy. It was to be used for the express purpose of salaries and wages for employees and workers of those industries. The fund was subsequently extended, twice, with the addition of BDT 2,500 crore and BDT 3,000 crore, increasing the stimulus package to BDT 10,500 crore. On 5 April, four fresh financial stimulus packages of BDT 67,750 crore were announced for four programs: increased public expenditure, formulation of a stimulus package, widening social safety net coverage, and increasing monetary supply. The Bangladesh Bank asked banks to extend special short-term loans of up to one year, which can be used for the purpose of supporting payroll bills and utility payments.

After the announcement of the lockdown and the stimulus package, the BGMEA urged all factories to close for the initial 10 days till 4 April. However, the government subsequently extended the lockdown period to 11 April and then to 14. This led to waves of workers trying to return from the villages to their workplaces.

At this point, the trade unions demanded that there should be a specific and clear declaration of factory closure with full pay and ensuring no job loss. They warned of labour unrest if workers were not given full wages. On 17 April, the BGMEA finally said that factories would reopen only when the pandemic was under control.

Once a stimulus package for the RMG sector had been approved, the Ministry of Finance provided a guideline for the disbursement of the package and it was agreed on 27 April that workers would be paid 60% of their basic salary during the lockdown, including the full month of April (“RMG Workers to Get 60% Salary for April,” 2020). Disbursement began on 3 May 2020 through mobile financial services directly to the RMG workers’ accounts. However, many wages remained unpaid because of the backlog

in payments employers had to cope with and the lack of banking facilities and mobile wallets for workers (Antara, 2020b). The BGMEA continued to express concern that the stimulus package was not sufficient to cover three months' full wages. Some employees had not been paid even for the month of March despite the fact they had been working (Kabir et al., 2021). According to the BGMEA, by 17 April, only 13% of its registered factories had not yet paid the wages, but industrial police data estimated that around 27% of factories had not paid workers wages (Munni, 2020a).

There was intensified labour unrest in May 2020 ("RMG Wages of March Still Unpaid in 370 Factories," 2020) and unions and the BGMEA continued to disagree about how many workers had not received due wages. After a number of tripartite meetings, BGMEA and the government decided to pay 65% of April wages and 50% of festival bonuses. The Sommito Garments Sramik Federation (SGSF) lodged a formal complaint with the MoLE, demanding legal action against factory owners who did not pay April wages, while the BGWS wrote to the Home Minister asking for the intervention to ensure workers were paid their full bonus. Despite MoLE instructions to the contrary, factory owners continued to lay off workers. Workers took to the streets to demand full salaries and the reinstatement of jobs and faced violent attacks, suspension from jobs, and court cases ("Still No Pay, Work or Full Bonuses," 2020).

On 4 June, the BGMEA president announced the possibility of a 55% job cut during the month of June due to lack of orders but added that sacked workers would be prioritized for re-employment when the situation improved ("RMG Factories May Slash Workforce From June: BGMEA Chief," 2020). This was met with sharp criticism from labour rights organizations, culminating in a circular published from the Directorate of Inspection of Factories and Establishment urging the BGMEA not to terminate any workers to avert labour unrest in the country. It is estimated that 17,579 workers had already been terminated by 31 May. Only 1.5 million workers had rejoined the factories by 1 June (Munni, 2020b).

The SGSF reported a significant number of terminations of pregnant workers, while others continued to work despite their condition for fear of losing their jobs. The federation's President Nazma Akhter told *The Guardian* on 9 July, "We are seeing a real increase in gender-based violence" (Politzer, 2020). In response to these reports, the Federation and IndustriAll Global Union joined forces on social media to call on the government to ratify the ILO Convention (C190) against violence and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Media reports identified discrepancies in the number of RMG workers who had been retrenched or terminated. There were allegations of "union busting" and targeting union membership. The Clean Clothes campaign alleged that unemployment had increased, and workers were still being paid low wages despite the BDT 10,500 crore stimulus package. Labour leaders also called for unemployment schemes and social protection for retrenched RMG workers based on research done by the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) and the World Bank.

It should be noted that the stimulus fund was further extended so that it grew to BDT 10,500 crore. The government also announced additional programs relating to increased public expenditure, widening social safety net coverage, and increasing monetary supply. The Bangladesh Government sought USD 1 billion in support from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to support businesses and industries hit by the pandemic.

2.2.2. Health and Safety

Preventive health measures were emphasized by the government, trade unions, and employers. After a tripartite consultative meeting on 25 April 2020, factories adopted multiple smaller shifts as advised by the BGMEA and set up handwashing and temperature checking facilities. Workers were asked to maintain distance while entering and exiting and wear masks and disposable caps. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) published a hygiene and safety guideline for garment factories on 29 April. Trade union leaders also engaged in advocating for the workers' health and safety, raising awareness, and distributing sanitisers and gloves. In the early days, there was great apprehension that reopening factories would lead to high levels of infection. According to a report published by BGWS, infections were on the rise with the workers returning to work, but this was challenged by the BGMEA (Antara, 2020c).

In the light of ongoing debates about whether factories should be opened or closed, the employers' associations had been downplaying the issue of workers' health and safety. They had sought instead to highlight economic aspects, such as loss of export revenue and the importance of the sector, in other words, on livelihoods rather than lives. However, they monitored the situation closely. Factories with high rates of infection were shut down. Some of the larger groups opened quarantine centres within the factory premises. The BGMEA started surprise factory visits to audit the health and safety monitoring system. It also set up three polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test labs for COVID-19 testing ("Three PCR Labs Open for Testing RMG Workers," 2020).

One major development at this time was the formation of a new national platform to monitor workplace safety in June 2020. RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), a tripartite platform with equal representation of owners, buyers, and labour rights groups, took over the functions of Accord. It proposed to carry out its workplace safety programs in the 1,600 factories associated with Accord but planned to later extend its activities to the rest of the industry ("RSC Takes Over Accord Operations," 2020).

2.2.3. The International Dimension of the Response

Given the garment industry's position within global value chains, there was strong international engagement from the start of the pandemic. The industry was hit very early on with the cancellation of orders by its international buyers. It sought the restoration of orders or compensation for cancellation. It began to regularly publish updates of order cancellations, naming brands and value of cancellations. The tracking of cancellations and the media coverage it received drew both national and international attention. Both national trade unions and the BGMEA sought the support of international unions and fair-trade bodies to put pressure on international buyers. Tradecraft Exchange asked fashion brands and retailers to honour their contracts against those who continued to cancel their orders or stop payments to suppliers.

The better-known brands began to respond to international pressure by the end of March. A number of brands, including H&M, PVH, Inditex, and Marks & Spencer, came forward with assurances to help garment suppliers by taking the shipment of goods that have already been manufactured or ordered. But it was reported in the media that they had suspended new orders. An online survey of Bangladeshi employers revealed that more than half of Bangladesh suppliers had the bulk of their in-process, or already completed, production cancelled (Anner, 2020).

The BGMEA and the government appealed to the different international actors for support. For instance, the government requested the US for two-year duty-free access to RMG products; the European Union (EU) was asked to give a transitional preferential trade package. The BGMEA also engaged with international rights groups, such as ILO, Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), to build global support and put pressure on buyers not to cancel orders. It took strong stances against some, such as threatening to blacklist Edinburgh Woolen Mills (EWM), to clear due payment and filing a lawsuit against Sears for refusing to pay for orders already shipped.

The pressure from the national trade unions and the BGMEA on the international labour rights groups resulted in the initiation of the “#PayUp” campaign, under which local suppliers were able to voice their demands to international buyers. The campaign published the names of international brands and buyers demanding they pay up the dues. The campaign claimed to have successfully enabled the payment of USD 1 billion to Bangladeshi suppliers.

2.2.4. The Role of the Media

The role of the media was a critical one in that it provided a public platform for different actors to present their own, often conflicting, accounts of what was going on in the industry. It was particularly important for workers because it allowed them to counter the accounts being presented by more powerful actors, including, of course, the BGMEA. As the media tracking exercise by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) revealed, newspaper front pages regularly reported on the RMG situation side by side with its updates on the pandemic more generally.

There was a great deal of press coverage as buyers’ and employers’ associations began to negotiate about payment of workers’ salaries and job security, with further pressure from trade unions and workers’ welfare organizations.² Workers’ protests and the backlash against them were widely covered in the initial period. The union leaders appeared regularly on television (TV) talk shows on the issue of the country’s economy, workers’ conditions, and demands. By June, there was a decline in press reporting of workers’ protests and violent confrontations with workers, but the trade union leaders used social platforms to spread the news effectively.

The international press took up the issue too. Trade union leaders were quoted in the international press, such as in the *Asia Review*, talking about workers’ hardship. *The Guardian* and *The Associated Press* quoted the leader of Bangladesh Center for Workers’ Solidarity that the brands might be losing profits, but workers are losing out on food and medicine. Other media news brought on activists who named defaulting brands. The naming and shaming as well as publicizing the cancellation mounted by the media brought immense pressure on international buyers. This was one of the main reasons that the brands started reconsidering their position by the end of March.

2.2.5. Secondary Research on the Impact

A number of rapid research projects were conducted to provide an alternative source of information about what was happening on the ground in the RMG sector. It drew attention to the differentiated access by factory size to the stimulus package. It found that chances of survival for a factory was linked

² <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/05/09/how-is-covid-19-affecting-the-rmg-industry-the-trade-unions-perspective>

partly to its size but more importantly to its membership of the BGMEA. Trade union responses to the pandemic also brought out differences in impact, with “size and status of the establishment” determining the reliability of wages and security of jobs (Sultan et al., 2020). Trade union leaders reported that small factories were at considerable risk of exclusion from the stimulus package because they were less likely to have established relationships with banks, to be affiliated to BGMEA/Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), to be compliant with laws and hence more fearful about disclosing their wage schedule. They were also less likely to be eligible as they were often sub-contractors for large factories and hence not direct exporters. In addition, the Mapped in Bangladesh (MiB) project, set up by a number of organizations to gather “accurate, credible and updated factory data” on the industry,³ found that the BGMEA/BKMEA registered factories were more likely to remain operational during the pandemic and also more likely to introduce safety provisions than unregistered factories.

Although various research studies reported on the impact of the pandemic on the industry and on its workers, very few focused specifically on women workers. However, an industry-wide assessment by Moazzem (2021) showed that while employment decreased by about 11% at an industrial level, the ratio of males to females remained the same. This was in contradiction to claims by trade unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that women workers were faring worse than men. A Google search for the impact on female RMG workers did not provide any further evidence on this matter.

There were a few studies on other forms of impact. The retrenchment and rehire policies of each factory reflected existing contracts, including contractual status, qualifications, and years of service, which differed for men and women (Mastura & Teng, 2020). These were effects of the same gender disadvantages that gave rise to gender inequalities in wages: lower qualifications, more interrupted experience, constraints on the ability to move in search of better wages and working conditions (both domestic obligations and restricted mobility). The study also found that the shutdown of schools and childcare facilities had increased the burden of unpaid care work on women. Financial insecurity at home appeared to have caused heightened tensions and an increase in gender-based violence. According to another study, women reported greater declines in their levels of food consumption than men (Rabbani et al., 2020).

Previous literature had shown how the RMG industry empowered women socially and economically with significant changes in the socio-economic condition and livelihood pattern. The consequence of loss of jobs in the RMG sector for women in Bangladesh thus was raised by various international organizations (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2020).

However, few studies explored gender issues in the RMG sector during the pandemic in great detail. Our study looks at precisely that, using qualitative methods to explore how a small group of garment workers experienced the pandemic and the strategies they adopted to cope. It also explores how the worker’s gender and the size and status of their factory differentiated their experiences. The paper concludes with some reflections on how garment workers experienced the trade-off between lives and livelihoods and how their position within global value chains affected this experience.

³ <https://mappedinbangladesh.org/>

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The research is based on qualitative interviews of male (10) and female (30) RMG workers and several key informant interviews (KIIs) with NGO staff and trade union leaders working on the RMG industry in Bangladesh. It was carried out during Jan–Feb 2021. Due to the COVID-19 situation, this research was conducted over the phone.

The sample for the qualitative respondents was drawn from a 2020 BIGD survey⁴ on 1,200 RMG workers using a mobile phone-based network sampling strategy to obtain a representative sample of garment workers in Bangladesh. The sample was selected primarily based on the following two characteristics:

- 1) garment workers who work/worked in the Dhaka division, and
- 2) respondents who were in garment factory jobs at the beginning of COVID-19.

From this restricted sample, we tried to ensure three types of respondents: (1) garment workers who had rejoined the RMG factories after the lockdown lifted, (2) garment workers who had returned to the village, and (3) workers who had changed occupation. This sampling was purposeful in order for us to explore which workers and why the workers had chosen or were forced to choose these livelihood strategies to cope with the impact of COVID-19 on the industry. The interview guidelines had different modules depending on the livelihood choices made by the respondents.

While trying to select 40 RMG workers for our study, we faced a number of challenges. We had to be able to call the respondents in our study. Not all those we initially approached could be contacted over the phone: the phone was switched off, belonged to someone else, or was with a family member who was then elsewhere. When the phone belonged to the husband, father, or father-in-law, the researchers had to convince them first to give access to the female respondent, which was not always granted. Nearly all respondents were employed, so they could not be reached during the day; some of them refused to talk because of time constraints or because they were scared of losing their jobs.

Conducting phone interviews also created some additional challenges. It made building rapport much more difficult, particularly in assuaging mistrust and cynicism caused by other actors who had conducted surveys with them making false promises. The interviews were often too long for those with limited time and had to be completed over a number of phone calls. Phone interviews mean a steady stream of conversation without face-to-face interaction and proved demanding for both respondent and researcher. In most cases, the husband was present in the room which hindered the female respondents from answering sensitive questions about violence at home or work openly.

We also failed to identify 10 female workers who had changed occupations from the BIGD sample. For this, we turned to Sobujer Ovijan, an NGO working with domestic and garment workers, through which we contacted three respondents to fulfil our required sample.

⁴ Project title: “The welfare consequences of employer responses to COVID-19 in export manufacturing in low-income countries.”

After the respondents had been identified and interviewed, the names of their factories were checked against BGMEA and Accord Alliance listings online to find out the number of employees and determine the size of the factory and to find out whether they were registered with the BGMEA and whether they were affiliated with Accord and/or Alliance. The qualitative data were entered into NVivo for analysis using a codebook developed earlier on the basis of our guideline and analytical framework.

We identified and categorized the workers according to their sex and the type as an earner (sole, main, or secondary), size of the factory, registration with the BGMEA, and affiliations with Accord and Alliance under three broad categories of workers who had rejoined the RMG factory after the lockdown lifted, those who had changed occupation, and those who had migrated back to the village. Initially, we were going to categorize factory sizes into small (below 500), medium (500+ to 2,500), and large (2,500+). However, the contrasts between the workers' choices and strategies were only meaningful when small factory workers were compared against the rest. Therefore we finally settled on comparing small (below 500 workers) and large (500+ workers) factory workers.

We provide a brief description of our sample but further details are contained in Table A1. We had 30 female respondents, the majority of whom were in their 20s and 30s, the youngest being 19 years and the oldest 35 years. The 10 male respondents were also mostly in their 20s and 30s but the oldest was 60 years old. Four of the female RMG workers explicitly stated they had no education; five stated they had primary education, three had secondary education, and one had passed her higher secondary certificate (HSC) examination. Unfortunately, data on the rest is missing. Education-related data was also missing for six of the male respondents' education; of the other four, one had no education, one studied till class 9, one studied till Secondary School Certificate (SSC), and one studied till HSC. Household sizes varied mostly between 2–6 members for both women and men. Four men lived alone, while eight out of the 30 female respondents lived with only their husbands. Sixteen female respondents had dependents back in the village—mostly children or parents, but also in-laws in a few cases. All men except one also had dependents in the village. Women (mostly with husbands) and men (mostly alone) migrated from the village in search of work.

In terms of their earning status, six respondents are sole earners (four are females and two are males), 12 are main earners (four females and eight males), and the rest 22 respondents (all females) are the secondary earners (see Table A1 for details). Most of them earned or earn more than BDT 10,000 as garment factory workers, but their switch to domestic work or poultry rearing is evident from the current salaries of as low as BDT 1,800–2,500.

3.2. Conceptual Framework: Livelihoods, Capital, and Capabilities

In order to organize our empirical material around our key objectives of understanding responses to the crisis by women workers and their families, we draw on the framework developed by Kabeer (2018) which combines insights from the livelihoods literature with the concepts of capitals and capabilities drawn from Bourdieu (1977) and Sen (1987). The framework conceptualizes livelihoods in terms of the strategies through which households relate their means and ends within the rules and norms that prevail in the wider society and pose cultural constraints on different groups of people about what they

are, and are not, able to do: their “capabilities.” Given our concern with women workers, the patriarchal constraints that prevail in Bangladesh will be particularly relevant to our study.

The “ends” element of livelihoods refers to both the material concerns of household members—their search for survival, security, and prosperity for the membership—as well as their more intangible goals which reflect the human need for respect, dignity, social status, or spiritual satisfaction, goals which have an intrinsic value because they give meaning to people’s lives.

The “means” element of the framework refers to the various resources that people have at their disposal, resources that become forms of capital when they are put to use to achieve their desired goals. These capitals can therefore have instrumental or intrinsic value depending on what they are used for. We draw on Bourdieu’s distinction between different forms of capital. In the present context, wages, access to credit, and land in villages of origin (given these workers are migrants from the countryside) were among the most frequently mentioned material assets. Certain consumer assets, like refrigerators and mobile phones, also took on a special significance during the lockdown. Human capital endowments took the form of skill, experience, and formal education. The primary form of social capital for the workers in our study were their family networks, wider networks of kin and community, and the generally more ephemeral relationships they had cultivated with people who were in a position to help them (employers, WPCs, trade unions, and local shopkeepers).

As for symbolic capital, many garment workers valued their jobs, despite the hard work and difficult conditions that many worked under, because they believed that it carried greater status than many other jobs available to women with their qualifications. It is worth noting that in our survey of garment workers in 2018, most of the women believed that garment work was associated with more rights than other forms of employment, such as domestic or agricultural labour (Kabeer et al., 2018).

One reason they enjoy these rights relates to the nature of the garment industry in Bangladesh and its location in global value chains that are headquartered in Western countries with active civil societies that put pressure on garment retailers to observe certain minimum labour standards in the factories they source their garment from.

The “strategy” element of our conceptual framework refers to the various activities through which people mobilize the resources at their disposal to achieve their desired ends: migration behaviour, wage labour activities, efforts to save, and the cultivation of new forms of social capital.

While a household’s position in the social hierarchy reflects its capital endowments, determines its opportunities, and shapes its immediate and longer-term goals, patriarchal inequalities are woven into relationships within and beyond the household mean that men not only have greater command than women over household resources and greater access to opportunities outside, but they also exercise authority over what household priorities ought to be and the kinds of activities women from their households are permitted to pursue. Women’s capabilities are curtailed by their gender to a far greater extent than men. Finally, women’s socially ascribed responsibility for unpaid care and housework further restricts their range of livelihood options.

In this paper, we discuss how gender disadvantage among the garment workers in our study placed women in less well paid and less secure jobs than men and differentiated their ability to cope with the pandemic. Although garment factory jobs are classified as formal, the actual formality of the jobs varied

considerably with factory size and registration status: factories registered with the BGMEA, and sometimes regulated by the Accord or Alliance agreements were far more formal in their arrangements than the smaller, unregistered factories. As our analysis shows, the degree of formality of a factory determined the degree of protection extended to these workers during the pandemic. And because the women in our study were more likely than men to be located in small, unregistered factories, some of the gender differences in their experiences of the pandemic reflected these differences in location.

The main questions we are asking in this paper are:

- How did a group of workers characterized by varying degrees of formality in their work arrangements and varying degrees of visibility in global value chains strategize to cope during an exceptional crisis?
- How did their position in global value chains affect their experiences during this period? What does this suggest by way of policy interventions to deal with crisis situations more generally?

4. Findings From the Study

4.1. Life Before COVID-19

All the workers in our sample and the vast majority of workers in the wider export garment industry migrated specifically to take up jobs in the industry. They come from the poorer districts of Bangladesh, mainly the poverty belt in the northern districts. Most of those in our study came in the last 5–10 years, though a few had migrated much earlier as children with their parents. Men who had migrated as adults had generally been self-employed, working on their own land or businesses but also as wage labourers. They were generally unmarried and had migrated on their own. Seven of the 10 were now married. Two of their wives worked, one as a tailor and the other as a garment worker. A third was studying.

Twenty-six of the 30 women were married and lived with their husbands who mainly worked in the industry, though some were informal wage workers, street vendors, carpenters, stonemasons, day labourers, rickshaw pullers, etc. They lived with their spouses, parents, or in-laws. The remaining four were widowed or divorced, sole earners in their households and had moved to the city with their children in search of better earning opportunities. Only one of the women in our study had worked in her village of origin (as a day labourer). The rest were involved in unpaid family labour because of the dearth of jobs in rural areas. Nine out of the 40 workers (seven women and two men) had left their children in the village with their parents or parents-in-law and sent money for their expenses. This allowed both husband and wife to earn and save before returning to the village. Four of the 40 lived alone: one woman and three men.

Those female workers who were secondary earners in their households generally had husbands in full-time regular work, many in the garment sector. The four households in our study supported by a primary or sole female earner reported the lowest incomes.

The majority of women had only primary education; very few had gone on to secondary level. The less educated were more likely to work in the small, unregistered factories. The men were more likely to have secondary or higher levels of education and to work in the larger factories.

The workers lived in poor-quality rented accommodation in low-income settlements with rents varying between BDT 1,500 and BDT 6,000. They generally lived within walking distance of their factories to save on transport and come home for lunch.

Workers who had prior acquaintance with someone in the RMG sector—relatives, neighbours, or members of their village community—were more easily able to get the information they needed on where to live and how to find work. A few workers found jobs through spouses who were already working in an RMG factory. Those without networks had to rely on other means, often going from factory to factory in search of work. The varying degree of formality within the industry was evident in recruitment processes. Registered factories, most often the larger ones in our study, often posted vacancy notices about job availability outside the factory, how many vacancies and at what level. They required higher qualifications, application forms, and job interviews. Smaller factories dispensed with these formalities and workers would often find jobs in them through enquiries at the factory gates. The more complicated process of entry into larger factories meant that many workers first joined the smaller factories to gain experience before seeking work in larger, “compliant” factories. Most male workers had switched between factories 3–10 times over their career in search of higher salaries and better positions. Female workers were far less likely to report this strategy. Male workers who had not sought to switch factories were those who were satisfied with the benefits and facilities in the factory they were in.

Salaries reflected factory size and position within the factory, varying between BDT 6,000 and BDT 22,000 before the pandemic, with the supervisors in our study reporting the highest wages. Large factories also had a range of benefits, which could include attendance bonus, production bonus, Eid bonus, maternity leave, food expenses, and house rent. Higher salaries, supplemented by overtime payments, meant that these workers were in a position to save. Smaller factories, by contrast, offered only fixed monthly salaries with none of these benefits. The fact that they did not even offer overtime duties meant that there was no scope for workers to top up their salaries.

The male workers in our study were supervisors, cutting supervisors, packers, iron men, and operators. The women worked as helpers, poly men, quality checkers, and operators. Men tended to occupy better-paid positions. Their salaries ranged from BDT 11,500 to BDT 19,000 a month, whereas the female RMG workers earned between BDT 6,000 and BDT 16,000.

4.2. Learning About the Pandemic (8–25 March)

The first case of COVID-19 in Bangladesh was reported on 8 March 2020, but did not raise much alarm in the general population. It was not till 25 March that the government announced what was initially a 10-day lockdown effective within 24 hours. It was initially described as a “general holiday” to minimize alarm. The announcement gave rise to a mass exodus of migrant workers returning to their villages. With the start of the lockdown, water, rail, road, and air travel were banned. All non-essential organizations, businesses, and educational institutions were closed. Only pharmacies and open food markets were allowed to stay open. Lorries carrying essential supplies were also permitted.

On 2 and 3 April, when the initial 10-day-long lockdown period was coming to an end, thousands of workers started walking back to Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur, and Chattogram since there was still no transport. But the government then declared extensions to the “general holiday” to 30 May 2020.

All garment factories, regardless of size, had closed with the declaration of lockdown but the experience of the lockdown varied significantly, particularly between workers of registered and unregistered factories, in terms of duration of lockdown, how well informed they were about the prospect of re-employment, the external support they received, and hence their capacity to cope. As we outlined earlier, workers in the RMG sector received a disproportionate degree of external support compared to other workers because of their strategic importance to the country's foreign exchange earnings and their international visibility as part of global value chains involving some of the largest retail multinationals in Europe and the US. Their workers were also far more active in their demands for salaries and job assurances. And as we noted, these combined efforts had some effect. For instance, the government announced its stimulus package for the industry at the same time as it announced the lockdown.

Most workers in our study found out about the virus from TV, but registered factories began to raise awareness about the pandemic well before the announcement of the lockdown and to take precautionary measures against infection. These included wearing face masks, physical distancing, hand washing, temperature checking, and disinfectant use. Announcements about these measures were made several times a day over the public address (PA) system. Our interviews with this group of workers revealed their familiarity with some of the vocabulary of the pandemic—quarantine, social distancing, masking:

“We heard about the virus through TV news and from the office. They made mic announcements at the gates about the virus. I heard that we needed to stay neat and clean and wash our arms and legs with soap and wear masks.”

—Liza, secondary earner, large registered factory

“Our factory was open for a few days after the virus struck. We took necessary precautions during that time—there was soap and water for washing hands and we maintained social distancing. The sewing machines were placed so that there was at least three to four feet distance between them. To protect ourselves from the virus, the factory authorities told us repeatedly over the megaphone to wash our hands with soap and water and use hand sanitiser. Wearing masks has always been mandatory. We maintained social distancing while entering the factory. We had to wash our hands inside the factory at regular intervals.”

—Mamun, main earner, large registered factory

“When the news of the virus first started to spread, the factory authorities told us to stay safe, maintain personal hygiene, keep everything clean and tidy, and take our own precautions.”

—Shoheli Akter, secondary earner, large registered factory

“I know that, in order to protect ourselves from the virus, we have to wear masks, wash our hands four or five times a day, stay neat and clean, and keep our homes clean. Yes, I did all that.

—Popy Akter, secondary earner, large registered factory

Workers from 10 unregistered factories learnt about the virus through rumours and stories which left them with a confused understanding of what it was. Rubina, a 25-year-old machinist from one of these factories, thought initially that Corona was a person because of the way people talked about it:

“One day as I went to the office, all the other boys and girls there kept saying, ‘Look, the Corona is coming! Corona is coming!’ I was wondering about what they were saying and what ‘Corona’ meant. As soon as I entered, they said, ‘Stop! Corona is coming!’”

—Rubina, sole earner, small unregistered factory

There was also a considerable difference in how workers were kept informed about their factories’ plans once lockdown was announced. They had all been initially informed that the lockdown would last for 10 days. Most workers from the registered factories found out about the extension of the lockdown through the notices put up at their factory gates:

“When the virus struck, they first closed down the factory for 10 days and then they kept extending the shutdown. We came to know of the extensions from the notices they posted. It was specified on the notice how many days the factory would remain closed. They didn’t make any verbal announcements.”

—Renu Begum, main earner, large registered factory

Some of these workers were fortunate in that they were updated regularly by phone calls from their managers who had advised them at the outset not to return to their villages but to remain in the city ready to take up their jobs as soon as the factories opened. This was mainly reported by male workers:

“I learnt that the factory was closing down from notices that were posted in the factory and we were also informed verbally by the factory management. We went back to our houses and stayed there. First, it was announced that the factory would remain closed for seven days. Then, after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressed the nation, they extended the closure. When they announced the closure, they told us that we would all be retaining our jobs and should stay home and not go anywhere.”

—Mamun, main earner, large registered factory

“The management telephoned each of us to inform us.... They said, ‘The factory will remain closed for an unspecified time under the circumstances.’ They also said, ‘Keep in touch with all the others so that you know when the factory reopens. Once it reopens, you will resume your regular duties.’”

—Rafiq, sole earner, small registered factory

For workers from the small, unregistered factories, this was a period of great uncertainty. The lack of information from their factory management did not help. They had to visit the factory gate periodically to see if the factory had reopened or not. Not only did they find the factory closed but there was no one to give them any information about when it might open and whether they would still have jobs. The timelines for re-opening varied: even after the lockdown was officially lifted after a month, their

factories remained closed for an undisclosed length of time, ranging from a further three weeks to three months. Three of the 10 small second-tier factories in our sample had closed immediately with lockdown because of the cancellation of orders from larger factories. One of them was registered. Two small, unregistered factories continued work on a clandestine basis, hanging locks on the factory gates to give the impression they were closed but were shut down by the authorities after protests by other factory workers from the locality.

None of the workers received salaries initially, but this changed after pressure from trade unions and workers' protests. Two of the women from small factories in our study had been directly involved in these protests.

“After the factory closed down, they called all of us to the factory one day and told us that they would give us 60% of our salaries. When the workers protested, they said they would see later what they could do but we should resume work in the meantime. Later they gave us our [full] salary.”

—Rubina, sole earner, small unregistered factory

“After the advent of the virus, they called us to a meeting and the owner explained the situation. Later they tried to get away without paying us any salary at all but we managed to realize the 3,000 takas after launching a movement. I joined the movement to realize our salaries. Our demand was that we should be paid the 5,300 takas basic salary we are entitled to. The factory has been shut for the last three months since it closed in March because of the lockdown. All the workers were given leave at that time. Yes, they paid us our arrear salaries before the lockdown. No, they did not pay us full salary; they gave us 3,000 takas for three months.”

—Momena Khatun, secondary earner, small registered factory

Most other workers from small factories had been too frightened to join for fear of jeopardizing their jobs. Those from larger factories also did not join but primarily because the WPC in registered factories had been involved in negotiating for their salary during the COVID-19 lockdown.

As a result of the protests, 31 of the 40 workers in our study received some salary during this period, with 12 from the registered factories getting paid their full basic salary on a regular basis. Registered factories were also closed for a shorter period, varying from 21 to 40 days. The remaining 19 got 60% of their salary in accordance with government rules. Their factories remained closed for around 2.5–3 months. Seven workers from the smaller, unregistered factories did not receive any salary during the shutdown. Then there were three workers who lost their jobs because their factories closed down in this initial period.

Workers from the larger factories were also the most optimistic about the future as they were convinced their factories were too large to close down:

“We never thought that we would permanently lose our jobs; it was unthinkable that such a large factory would close down for good. We knew that we would be able to resume work.”

—Renu Begum, main earner, large registered factory

“We knew that our jobs were not at risk—that we would be able to resume work when the situation improved. The factory authorities put up posters stating this. The shutdown went into effect on the 26th day of the month. We went on leave, but we got that month’s salary on the 10th of the following month when the factory reopened.”

—Rehana, sole earner, large registered factory

However, we found that two of the larger, registered factories started laying off their workers as orders were cancelled. One relied on Chinese buyers, the other on Indian; so it may have been that they were less under pressure to protect jobs from the international fair trade organizations.

Those from the smaller, registered factories were more hopeful about their future than the unregistered ones. They had received 60% of their salaries throughout the lockdown and believed that they would get their jobs back, particularly if they had some expertise. The rest had far less confidence that they would get their jobs back, even those that received some assurance from employers.

Anoara, a helper in a small, unregistered factory and the secondary earner in her household, said,

“After the lockdown, all factories were closed. Well, they assured the workers saying, ‘Don’t be afraid. Just be safe and careful. You will be working for us again.’ Well, the workers were worried and nervous. They couldn’t rely on the words of the owners of the factories. They realized that they would have to look for jobs elsewhere in case their factory didn’t hire them back. Everyone was afraid at that time. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t go anywhere or to the factory as it was closed.”

4.3. Coping With Lockdown (March–May 2021)

As expected, the experience of the lockdown, the efforts to cope with it, varied considerably—primarily by factory type and gender. While all the workers in our study reported reductions in their regular incomes, those in smaller, unregistered factories faced much greater reductions than others. Of the 31 workers who received salaries during this period, 12 from registered factories received their full basic salary regularly, but not any overtime or bonuses. These workers were best positioned to cope with lockdown: not only could they rely on their full basic salary, but they were also more likely to have savings to tide them over the lockdown period. But even for those who could save, the money did not last beyond two months.

The remaining 19 workers received 60% of their salary but sometimes into the lockdown period. They had to use their savings or take out loans to survive till their salaries came in. The remaining nine workers either did not receive any salary or lost their jobs. They had not earned enough to have savings. Most had to take out loans. A total of 13 workers reported having borrowed money, most often from relatives, during the lockdown: 11 of them were from small, unregistered factories.

While most of the female workers were secondary earners, with mainly male workers in their households earning the primary income, the latter either became unemployed or reported reduced earnings.

“My husband didn’t have any work during that period either. It’s not like only the garment factories were shut down. During the lockdown, the entire area and all businesses were shut down. They paid me just one month’s salary. They didn’t pay our salaries for the next two months. We had some savings which we used to get by.”

—Rita, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

4.3.1. Managing Expenditures

Given the uncertainty that most of the workers faced with regard to their incomes, how long the lockdown would last, and what awaited them at the end, there was a common strategy of cutting back on discretionary expenditures and prioritizing the essential. Rent was one of these necessary expenditures, one that represented a large part of their salaries. Their utility bills were also higher as they had to remain home for much of the day. While the level of rent was not open to negotiation, there was some scope for negotiating the timing. Those from the large factories were in a better position not only to pay some of their rent but also to assure their landlords that they would pay any arrears once they were re-employed. The landlords tended to accept this:

“The landlord understood the situation and knew that applying pressure would not yield any results, he realized that we were in no position to pay even if he pressured us. He didn’t badger us; we told him to accept whatever we could give since we couldn’t give more even if he pressured us—where could we get the money? We managed to convince him in this manner and he didn’t say anything.”

—Rabeya Akter, secondary earner, large registered factory

No such assurance could be given by workers from smaller factories; workers who had lost their jobs or did not receive any salary faced considerable pressure to pay their rents or face a penalty.

Food was the other essential expenditure. Very few workers faced acute food crises, but most had to adjust to reduced circumstances. All workers said that they had eaten fish and meat on a fairly regular basis before the lockdown. Some of those from the larger, registered factories could maintain their diets at this standard. Six workers owned refrigerators, five of whom were from large factories, and were able to stock up on fresh food for a month at a time during a period when such food, in particular, was becoming more expensive. The rest had to cut back on fresh food and switch to cheaper diets, mainly “dry” or non-perishable food.

It had been common practice among workers to buy food on credit during the month and settle their debt at the end of the month. Those from the large factories could continue with this practice as shopkeepers regarded them as regular salaried workers likely to get their jobs back. There was some increase in tension among other workers as the period of lockdown increased. Workers from unregistered factories clearly faced greater pressure to repay credit on time. Some had to borrow money from their families at home while others sold off their furniture.

Dilara, an unemployed worker from a small, registered factory and the secondary earner in her household, spoke of the pressure she came under during this period:

“We had gotten into a good amount of debts, we fell behind on the rent, and on top of that, we had unpaid bills to pay to a store.... The situation was getting out of control, and we expressed our interest to return to our village. The landlord said, ‘You can take all your possessions and return to your village but only after paying the due rent in full.’”

She had collected some of her possessions but after some bargaining, left some behind to adjust against the rent she owed. When she returned, she brought money to pay off what was due.

This was a period of hardship, particularly for workers from small factories, even registered ones. For instance, Bedana, who worked in a small, registered factory and had secondary earner status, told us:

“We experienced some difficulty in meeting our expenses during the lockdown. Our combined income was 12,000 takas during that period.... Our house rent alone is 5,000 takas. We had some savings which we drew on but we had to go hungry some of the time. We made do somehow, sometimes surviving on one meal a day.”

But it was workers from the unregistered factories who reported the greatest hardship. They had to skip meals frequently as they were short of money to buy food nor were they in a position to borrow. Previously Majeza was a helper in a large, non-BGMEA registered large factory (Indian company). During the lockdown, she joined domestic work to support her family as the secondary earner. Majeza said,

“I have never borrowed any money. I don’t buy food on credit; if I don’t have money, I am willing to go hungry. I am not one to go for loans. I don’t borrow money because I don’t know how I will repay it. That is my greatest worry. I don’t have any savings left. I spent whatever I had during the lockdown when I had to sit idle at home.”

Momena Khatun worked in a small, registered factory as a secondary earner in her household and her husband lost his job during the lockdown.

“During the lockdown, we had to reduce my standard of living because we didn’t have any income at that time. We were barely able to eat. I had to prioritize the expenses which were absolutely essential. We are poor people; we spent most of our money on daily food.”

As far as educational expenditures for children were concerned, schools were closed down but as there were no fees, it did not affect their situation much except in terms of discretionary expenditures, such as transport costs. But in a period of stretched finances, parents had to make sacrifices to make sure children did not go short.

“We don’t care about ourselves. I just try to make sure that I can provide him with the things he needs. I sell my chickens so that I can meet my son’s needs.”

—Momtaz, sole earner, small unregistered factory

Those with at least a primary level of education tried to help their children with study at home but only five could afford private tuition. Two of the workers said that they had thought about sending their children to work not because of financial hardship but to learn some skills. There was also a fear that the

children had to sit idle at home and that they might become bad by hanging around with the bad boys of the locality. One worker sent her older son to work in a garage.

“He had some education. But his school remained closed due to the Corona. We couldn’t admit him to a school this year. So, we thought that it would be better if we put him to work in a garage so that he can gain some skills.”

—Anoara, main earner, small unregistered factory

4.3.2. Return Migration

Nineteen of the 40 workers had dependents like young children and older parents back in their village and sent money back regularly. During the lockdown, around half of them were no longer able to continue. But 13 of them, mainly male and mainly from the smaller, unregistered factories, opted to migrate back to their villages. Return migration was easier for male workers since they were more likely to have migrated on their own and to have left their families in the village.

Female workers, on the other hand, had migrated with their families; some had admitted their children to school. Anjuman, who worked in a large, registered factory, was one of the few women who did return but it was with her husband. They had both lost their jobs and, like the other male workers who returned, could no longer afford to pay their rent and deal with the rising cost of food.

Workers from registered factories were less likely to migrate for a number of reasons: assurances they had received from their employers that the factory would open any day and they would be re-employed; they were receiving salaries and could afford to stay on in the city; to move would expose them to greater risk of infection; problems of transport; and the fear of quarantine, as they had been told return migrants had to stay in quarantine for 10–15 days in their villages in public buildings, like schools, and could not meet with anyone during that time. There were also, of course, the problem of transport once lockdown began.

4.3.3. External Support

We have discussed in detail the support given by the government to the industry in order to support workers’ wages. This level of support was not given to any other group of “non-essential” workers and it was important in helping, at least those from registered factories, to cope with the crisis. One other means by which workers coped was through other forms of external support, mainly given as one-off transfers. Two workers from large, registered factories reported such support from their employers. It was customary in certain factories to give workers a cash bonus on the occasion of the Bengali New Year. This year, they reported that they were given the cash equivalent as rice, soap, soya bean oil, potatoes, and lentils. Most of the rest managed without external support but spoke of the psychological importance of the concerns expressed frequently by factory authorities. Their managers phoned on a regular basis to enquire about their condition and to provide reassurance about their future.

For workers from smaller factories, who did not receive any such reassurance, material support from external sources was important but only seven received it, mainly in the form of one-off transfers in kind. The form of basic foods, either from the government, NGOs, or affluent people in the neighbourhood.

4.4. The Post-Lockdown Period

4.4.1. Factory Responses

The post-lockdown period began in June 2020. All factories had followed the government's instructions about lockdown but some prolonged the duration of closure beyond the official period. Twenty-seven of the 32 factories in our study re-opened promptly but continued to maintain precautionary measures to protect workers from infection. The larger factories were stricter in observing guidelines: washing hands, use of sanitisers, wearing masks, caps, and gloves during work, maintaining a certain distance from other workers by standing in the circle drawn by the factory authority, checking body temperatures before entering, repeated mic announcements and instructions to follow safety measures, and maintaining time slot for entering the factory and lunch hour to avoid crowding. If any of the workers have caught a cold or fever, then they were sent to the medical wing of the factory if the facility is available and guaranteed leave immediately. The leave could be from three days to a month based on the severity of the sickness. The authority did not deduct the salary for those days. The factory authorities did not provide any assistance for testing the Coronavirus. Nor did they provide assistance with vaccinations.

Some of the smaller factories that worked on a subcontract basis had faced considerable struggle during the lockdown. When the larger factories faced cancellation of orders by foreign buyers, they had reduced orders to the small, second-tier factories. Some of them opened at the end of the lockdown period but had to close again because they failed to get orders. A follow-up interview held with one of their workers in March 2021 revealed the problem was still unresolved for some of them:

“The factory authorities have been giving us different dates—first, they said the factory would reopen in January [2021] then they said it would reopen in February. Now we are into March and I will wait till the 1st [of April]. If it doesn't reopen then I will join another factory. I have been working here for the last 6–7 years but I never experienced such protracted periods of enforced leave.”

—Momena Khatun, secondary earner, registered small factory

The smaller, unregistered factories tended to be lax about precautions, restricting them to washing hands and wearing masks. But it is worth noting that all of the respondents in our study said that they had not gotten infected during the lockdown, and believed that neither did any workers in their factories. Two reported that someone in their management had got infected while one reported that a co-worker had got infected after reopening the factory. It should be noted that, despite fears that the city's slum neighbourhoods would become virus hotspots, this did not happen, leading slum dwellers to view the virus as “a rich man's disease.”⁵ As Momena, working in a small, registered factory as the secondary earner in her household, said in response to a question about her views about the measures taken by government and employers to protect workers,

⁵ In fact, a study by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) found that 71% of slum dwellers in Dhaka city had developed the Coronavirus antibodies.

“I have the same opinion as the next person. The virus has mostly attacked the rich, not the poor. Have you heard that any poor person died from the virus; most of the casualties were from among the rich. As for the changes that the virus has brought to our lives, there are more restrictions now: we have to wear masks, we have to do this and we have to do that. But for us poor people, this is hardly a change.”

4.4.2. Workers’ Trajectories Post-Lockdown

The workers from large factories and some of the smaller, registered factories faced a shorter period of lockdown than others and recovered from it more quickly. They were behind on the rent for a maximum of two months and were able to settle their arrears once they went back to work or, in the case of married women workers, once their husbands started earning. They were also more quickly able to resume normal levels of household expenditure and start saving again.

Workers from smaller factories who resumed employment when the factories re-opened had to gradually pay off their arrears to their landlords and debts to grocery shops, but their renewed employment status served as a form of collateral to continue to purchase food on credit.

The post-lockdown work trajectory differed across the workers in our sample: some resumed employment in the same factory as before; some lost their jobs but found employment in another garment factory; some lost their jobs or quit and then took up a different occupation; and some were still unemployed. We see the distribution of workers across these different trajectories in Table 1 (see below). Eleven of the 30 female workers and eight of the 10 male workers lost their jobs either because they were dismissed or because the factory closed due to the fall in orders. They were generally over-represented in the small factories. In the rest of this section, we examine what lay behind these different trajectories.

4.4.2.1. Re-Joined the Same Factory

Twenty-one out of 40 workers rejoined the same factory at pre-lockdown levels of salary, although the reduction in orders meant that they did not earn the same amount of overtime. They came from factories of various sizes and registration statuses. The large factories were able to reach orders at pre-COVID levels; their workers were thus able to start earning overtime soon after and were soon receiving festival bonuses, and other benefits.

“We have our basic eight-hour shift and then we usually work two hours overtime per day [30 to 40 hours per month]. My basic salary is 9,568 takas per month and my attendance bonus was 600 takas. That added up to 10168 takas and together with two to four hours of overtime, my total take-home pay amounted to 11,000–11,500 takas per month.”

—Rehana, sole earner, large registered factory

Small factories were slower to regain their work orders and therefore these workers continued longer with reduced income levels, but those in registered factories fared somewhat better off.

4.4.2.2. Became Unemployed

Ten workers quit, while nine lost their jobs. Eight of these were male and 11 were female. Female workers who quit were mainly from small factories and working in lower positions. They quit because of low or delayed salaries, sickness, and the need to take care of young children. One worker from the large factory quit her job because of her newborn child and another one due to sickness. The majority of male workers who quit their jobs were from large factories and had quit because of low income due to elimination of overtime and benefits, fear of COVID-19 virus, sickness, and lack of interest in continuing with garment factory work.

Workers generally attributed being fired to factory-level layoffs. Some said that their management decided who to sack on the basis of how long they had worked in the factory. Taijul, who used to work in a large, registered factory, was told by phone that six workers from his section, who had worked for less than a year, were being laid off and that he was one of them. Another worker who also got fired shared her experience:

“Before dismissing me from my job, they paid my salary. They kept some of the workers at their jobs and fired the rest. Yes, after getting fired, I contacted people from the factory. They said that there wasn’t much work to do at the factory, so it didn’t need so many workers. No, no, the factory didn’t give me any support.”

—Rubina, sole earner, small unregistered factory

But one of the female workers from a small, unregistered factory believed that the management found excuses to get rid of those who had participated in the protests for salary payments at the start of the pandemic:

“Those workers were working well, but the owner was only interested in firing them as he couldn’t afford to keep all of them. He would find minor excuses and say, ‘It’s not going to work.’ Well, excuses such as... They were nitpicking. They would say things like, ‘No, you are not doing well.’ They would say this and that. And if a worker arrived late at work or skipped work for a day because of illness... Whenever they found such an excuse to fire someone, they fired them.”

—Dilara, secondary earner, small registered factory

The women who quit or were fired mostly remained unemployed or changed occupations to domestic work. The male workers did not remain unemployed, as they were able to either join another garment factory or switch to another occupation.

4.4.2.3. Joined Another RMG Factory

One woman and three men who had lost or quit their jobs joined another factory. In nearly all cases, they switched factories for a higher salary.

“I worked there till September [2020]. Yes, I quit that job because of this reason. You see, I’m the only bread earner. I can’t possibly maintain a family of three in Dhaka city with the money they paid me. The present factory offers better benefits than the previous one. They would grant us paid leave for those 14 days.”

—Rafiq, sole earner, small registered factory

4.4.2.4. Changed Occupations

Three female and five male workers switched to a new occupation. Four of these men had quit their jobs and returned to their villages, while the three female workers had been sacked.

The male RMG workers who migrated had been living in the city on their own and had families in the village. It was relatively easy for them to make the decision to return. Some were asked by their families to return for their own safety.

These workers took up work in their village.

“There is no dearth of work in the village. When a patch of land needs to be cultivated and two men are needed for the job, the owner employs two men and pays them 200 or 300 takas a day each. I have been doing this work for the last two months. With the state the country is in at present, it is very difficult for poor people like us to eke out a living!”

—Mamun, main earner, large registered factory

Mamun took up agricultural wage work so that he did not have to eat into his savings. Meanwhile, Joynal sold the property his father had left him to set up a shop:

“This was the last bit of property left to me by my father. Yes, I sold it after the factory shut down. What could I do? I had no work, so I sold the property and bought a bigger shop with the proceeds.”

—Joynal, main earner, part of a large unregistered factory

One of the workers, the only one from a small factory, entered construction work:

“I came with my uncle here to do construction work. Yes, I am trying to learn how to be a mason. If I can be a mason, I will be paid taka 700 or 1,000 instead of taka 500 which I get now. That’s my plan now.”

—Sumon, main earner, small unregistered factory

Although these workers were now earning less than they had in the city, they opted to remain in the village to avoid infection.

“Monthly earning from the tea stall here is about 8,000 to 9,000 takas. When I used to work in Dhaka and my father used to run the tea stall in the village, our combined income was around 30,000 takas per month. So you can well understand what a tough situation we are in at present.”

—Taijul, main earner, large unregistered Chinese factory

The three female workers who switched jobs after becoming unemployed were from small, unregistered factories and had little or no education. The experience they had acquired in factory work could not be easily transferred to other occupations open to them. Their household income has been reduced drastically and they have not found another job in the factory. They were forced to join domestic work

to maintain their family and survive in the city, although they felt domestic work was not a respectable occupation:

“I looked for work in garment factories while I was still working as domestic help. I went from factory to factory but everywhere it was the same story—they were not hiring any new workers. Finally, I became so frustrated that I decided to give up on garments work altogether. Women like me who lost their jobs from a garment factory are now also working in private houses as domestic help. There is no other option if you live in Dhaka because you have to pay house rent, garbage bills, electricity bills, etc.”

—Majeza, secondary earner, large unregistered Indian factory

The dilemma was much similar for another female worker who quit her job in the RMG sector and started as a domestic worker.

“At that time [during January–February 2020], I was working as a helper and drawing about 5,000 takas, including the pay for my overtime duties. Yes, they paid us bonuses if we came to work punctually, 200 takas to operators and 100 to helpers. As the factory was closed, I was worried about what to do next. I passed the time idly at home for a month. But we needed to pay the rent and pay for everything else including food. You already know how much money is needed to maintain a family, right? Thus, I started doing domestic work.”

—Anoara, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

All three women were married and though they earned less as domestic workers, were able to get by as their husbands contributed to the family budget:

“My husband is earning whatever money he can by pulling rickshaws and we maintain our family however we can with that. Yes, it has become difficult, but what is there to do about that? Yes, we are maintaining our family with my husband’s income.”

—Aklima, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

Those on their own reported some help from parents for children’s education.

4.4.2.5. Remained Unemployed

The women in our study were less able than men to re-join the sector, whether in the same or a different garment factory or to find work elsewhere. They had lower skills and education and could not easily transfer skills. They had no available option for any other job with the experience they gathered from the RMG sector. Consequently, of the 19 workers who quit/lost their jobs, the seven who were still unemployed when we interviewed them in January 2021 were all female, five from the smaller factories.

Four of these women returned to the village when they could not find other jobs. Three were sole earners in their household and could not afford to remain in the city, while the fourth had quit her job and left for the village when she had a baby, but she planned to go back to work once her child grew up a bit.

Three remained in the city and were seeking jobs. Their overriding preference was to find a job in the garment sector. They were unwilling to take up low-status domestic work. As one said,

“I am not looking for any other jobs. It feels shameful to do other work such as domestic work or working at restaurants. Even though we are poor, we just can’t do all types of work. That’s why I am only looking for garment factory jobs. They talk to us respectfully. Yes, yes, yes, people respect garment factory workers.”

—Rita, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

But they faced difficulty finding a factory job:

“Whoever I ask about jobs, they mention the Corona and say that there is no job vacancy. And in our villages, there is no work for women.”

—Rubina, sole earner, small unregistered factory

“After losing my job, I went to two factories to look for a job. But at both of the factories, I was told that they weren’t hiring any workers. They told me, ‘We aren’t hiring any workers. We are rather firing the workers if needed.’ That’s what they said and thus I returned home.”

—Dilara, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

“During the last four months [since October 2020], I have been seeking a job desperately. I have been looking for a job at garment factories. I have some experience of working at a garments factory, but the trend after Corona is that the garments factories don’t hire workers who don’t have any education. I will keep looking for a job at a garment factory this month. If I can’t still manage a job at a garment factory, I will try to get myself a domestic worker’s job.”

—Aklima, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

Two of the three were able to remain unemployed because they were married and secondary earners of their household, but they kept their expenditures low:

“We were able to pay off the debts we had in the village. But now we can’t spend any money on anything other than food, clothes, and accommodation. If I can get a job now, we will have some extra cash to spend on other things.”

—Aklima, secondary earner, small unregistered factory

The female worker who quit her job after the lockdown was from a large factory and has a husband who earns a moderate income to manage the family. The situation for her was not as bad as the other female unemployed workers from small factories. Moreover, as a worker from a large, registered factory, she received paid maternity leave, festival bonuses (Eid), and a full salary, which allowed her to start saving again:

“We are getting along fine with the money my husband earns. No, we never experienced food shortages. We had a stock of rice—we grow paddy [in the village], you see—so we managed to get by.”

—Anjuman, secondary earner, large registered factory

One was unmarried. She said that she had used up all her savings:

“I don’t work now and no money is coming in at the end of the month; so I am under a lot of stress. I survived on my savings up until now.”

—Sonia, secondary earner, large registered factory

The female unemployed workers (divorced) mostly from small factories, either main or secondary earners, returned to the village as a coping strategy as they were unable to pay rent and maintain other expenses in the city.

“I cancelled my tenancy at that mess before returning to the village. Yes, I had to pay the rent before cancelling my tenancy.”

—Rubina, sole earner, small unregistered factory

Four of these women returned to the village when they could not find other jobs. They went through a difficult time. They had to give up their household possessions in exchange to balance unpaid rent. Increased quarrels and violence within the family was also common. In Dilara’s case, it led to the breakdown of her marriage. She was forced to return to the village for an uncertain period of time.

“What becomes the condition of a family when the man of the family doesn’t work or earn any income? Yes, the condition becomes very bad. So, as he had no other option, he left. You see, there were only quarrels, arguments, and turmoil in the family. It reached the point where we couldn’t fix it [the relationship] anymore.”

—Dilara, secondary earner, small registered factory

Dilara further explained her condition:

“My father gives me as much support as he is capable of. But I am a woman and a woman needs various things. And it is not always possible for me to tell my father about those things. My conscience prevents me from asking so much of him. So, at present, I am deprived of many of the things that I want.”

Another worker shared her own experience of hardship:

“Well, I didn’t have any savings. I was unemployed during Corona. I didn’t have any money at all. You see, I had to pay for the expenses including my daughter’s education, treatment costs.”

—Rubina, sole earner, small unregistered factory

4.5. Lives Versus Livelihoods: Workers’ Perspectives

In the introduction to this paper, we suggested that the assumed trade-off between lives and livelihood associated with the pandemic was likely to play out very differently in the lives of workers, largely depending on whether they were essential or non-essential workers, the social benefits associated with their work, and the kinds of capitals they could fall back on to cope with the crisis.

As part of our research, we decided to pose a direct question to the workers in our study about how they perceived this trade-off. We asked them what they thought of the government's decision to close down garment factories, knowing that it had been done to reduce the likelihood of infection but that it had meant a loss of livelihoods for many workers. A few said they were not clear about what they were being asked; however, most respondents felt that the problems caused by the lockdown were worth the health and safety of their lives.

They were acutely aware of the problems caused directly by the pandemic. A number of registered workers referred to the negative impact of the lockdown on the livelihoods of others rather than themselves. An unmarried worker who had only herself to feed had not experienced much hardship during the lockdown but was very aware of the hardship experienced by large families with many mouths to feed on half their salaries. Another considered the decision to be devoid of concern for the country and its people.

“The decision to close down factories was good in some ways since it limited the risk of infection but on the other hand, how were workers going to eat?”

—Sonia, secondary earner, large registered factory

“It had been taken for the good of the population. There was really nothing else that could have been done.”

—Joynal, main earner, part of a large unregistered factory

While the lack of regular salaries created serious difficulties, they understood it to be the preferred option over contracting the virus and possibly dying. This preference was seen more among those in large factories, with higher job security and partial payment.

“If a worker stayed alive, they could always earn more money but if they went to work and contracted the virus, they would not be able to earn.”

—Rabeya Akter, secondary earner, large registered factory

“There has been an initial phase of panic when the factories closed but this soon subsided as people realized how deadly the virus was.”

—Robiul, main earner, small unregistered (Chinese company) factory

Those from smaller or unregistered factories were more likely to prefer an early reopening while maintaining precautions, even if they were aware of the risks to their lives.

As might be expected, those who expressed nuanced support for the government's decision were those who were hit hardest by it: women who were sole earners for their families as well as workers in small, unregistered factories who did not receive any of the government's stimulus package. They were much more likely to talk about what the loss of livelihoods had meant for them and to emphasize the importance of both lives and livelihood.

Molina, a widow working in a registered factory as the sole earner for her family, spoke of the hardship that those with limited means had undergone during the lockdown period:

“I think the government should have considered both lives as well as livelihoods. People had to eat in order to live and they had to be alive in order to eat.”

—Molina, sole earner, large registered factory

The lockdown which was supposed to have been for one month had stretched into almost three months. How could anyone survive for three months without an income? Molina was unable to return to her village like many of her co-workers had done:

“Never in my entire working life have I faced a situation like the one created by the virus, never have I felt so helpless.”

—Momena Khatun, secondary earner, small registered factory

Sumon, an unregistered factory worker, had supported the government’s decision as essential to protect lives but said he had lost his salaried job and now worked on a contract basis, working some days and unemployed on others, with no idea about what the future held.

Rony also recognized that the government had no choice, but its decision had hurt ordinary people: factories lost orders and workers had lost jobs, in many cases without being paid. They were struggling to pay their rent and buy food.

The impact of the closure on the wider population was also expressed by Taijul, a male worker from a registered factory who is the main earner in his household. He felt that the short-term suffering caused by lockdown was justified given the positive implications for the health of the general population. He pointed out that despite the suffering, the trials and tribulations, people had survived, they were alive. “That,” he believed, “was the greatest gift they could have.”

Respondents also commented on ways the shock could have been cushioned by the state, considering that closure of some sort was inevitable. Some of these workers were concerned with employees being laid off, others with employers not paying workers their full salaries. They believed that while the government had given assurance that workers would not be fired, no such laws were enforced and no action was taken against factories that fired many workers. This meant the factories felt the government was on their side. Respondents also noted that it would be better if the government could look into why so many workers were fired and even better if they could be rehired once factories reopened. Taijul had a more generalized response; he believed that the government could have done more, even if by just giving allowances to all workers and citizens.

Momena felt that the government had not considered the predicament of workers like her whose lives would be ruined by its decision.

“One can only earn if one is alive and to remain alive you need income. So there is a need for both life and income.”

—Momena Khatun, secondary earner, small registered factory

She had heard that many organizations and establishments had received help from the government, that it had provided financial assistance to factories to pay workers’ salaries but her factory workers had not benefited.

“We are small fry,” she said. “So how can we know what the bosses are up to?” She observed that the virus had brought more restrictions into people’s lives but added, “for us poor people, this is hardly a change.”

Other women workers from unregistered factories simply said that they had tried to survive on whatever wages they received. They understood that the factory owners could not pay full salaries or that they had not received any help from their owners; they knew nothing about any support they had received from the government.

These less fortunate respondents emphasized somehow keeping the factories running. Dilara believed that the workers were willing to work and that the factories could have been kept open if proper safety precautions were taken. Momena suggested instead of closing all the factories down, the employers could have arranged for staggered duty hours right from the beginning rather than after the factories reopened. “Then both lives and income,” she said, “would have been protected.”

5. Concluding Observations

While it is very evident that garment workers went through a period of uncertainty and hardship, exacerbated by the government’s lack of clarity about the duration of the lockdown and employers’ responsibility, what does stand out from various studies on the industry is the extent of the attention that it received. There are two reasons for this. One is that while the garment industry might be peripheral from the point of view of keeping essential services, those critical for daily lives, such as health and food, running smoothly, the industry was essential to the country’s economy because of its role in generating 80% of the country’s foreign exchange and 20% of its GDP. The health of the sector is inextricably linked with the health of the Bangladesh economy. A Fairwear report⁶ noted the assurance given by the Ministry of Health in August 2020 that vaccinations would be provided on a priority basis to RMG workers as “front line workers who had worked through the pandemic to protect the economy of the country.” And as BIGD’s examination of media coverage during the pandemic showed, newspaper front pages regularly reported on the RMG situation side by side with updates on the pandemic more generally.

The second reason was the position of the export industry within global value chains. Its workers had long drawn the attention of international campaigns for labour standards and workers’ rights. Local unions and organizations were able to link up with international counterparts to constantly challenge official narratives of what was going on in the industry and the extent to which they were conforming, or failing to conform, to government directives. This international pressure persuaded many of the buyers to rethink their strategy of the abrupt cancellation of orders. As we saw, the government put together a major stimulus package intended primarily to help pay workers’ salaries in export industries, which essentially meant the garment industry.

The BGMEA had continuously monitored the situation in the garment industry since the start of the pandemic. By August 2021, RMG employers had decided that they would run factories at full capacity,

⁶ <https://www.fairwear.org/covid-19-dossier/worker-engagement-and-monitoring/country-specific-guidance/covid19-bangladesh/>

maintaining health guidelines, despite the government's directive to reduce the workforce in all organizations amid the surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths. More than 50% of exporters said they had to accept much lower prices for their products than had been the case before the pandemic (see Footnote 7). They, in turn, were rehiring workers at lower pay.

But there was a turnaround in the industry's performance as buyers started reviving most of the cancelled orders. Garment export receipts in July were 14.18% higher than the monthly target of USD 2.84 billion. The value of the country's total exports was USD 3.91 billion in July, the highest monthly estimate in the country's history. According to *The New Age* ("Bangladesh Export Earnings Rebound to Record \$3.91b in July," 2020), this was largely due to the increased shipments of RMG products. Buyers had started reviving cancelled orders so it appeared that factories would be able to sustain themselves.

There have been various recommendations by organizations in the country for how best to protect the industry and the workers during the pandemic. Two common themes run through them: the need for coordination between different stakeholders to deal with the pandemic and the importance of cash transfers.

On the issue of coordinated action, IndustriALL⁷ called for a tripartite (government, employers, and the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council) monitoring task force to be established under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour to ensure that labour regulations were observed. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) suggested the need for cooperation between suppliers and buyers/retailers to work out a method of sharing revenue losses incurred for cancellation/deferment/withdrawal of orders. IndustriALL, Awaj Foundation, and the CPD are among the organizations calling for emergency cash transfers as assistance to meet the day-to-day expenses of workers hit hard by the pandemic.

We would like to conclude the paper with a number of general observations on these two themes. Based on research carried out in 2017 on the views of different actors in the Bangladesh garment industry, including workers, about the impacts associated with the Accord and Alliance agreements (Kabeer et al., 2020), we had supported the idea of a "shared responsibility model" put forward by Barrett et al. (2018) to address continued deficits in labour standards in the industry. This would bring together representatives of workers, employers, buyers, and the main importing countries. However, we also suggested that shared responsibility should be based on some form of a contractual agreement between these different actors rather than left to their goodwill as envisaged by Barrett et al. Such a shared responsibility model would have made it far harder for buyers to unilaterally cancel orders and require employers to shoulder the revenue losses on their own. The need for negotiation would have been built into the model. What we have instead are the ex-post calls for closer cooperation on the issue of revenue losses.

The second theme relates to calls for cash support for workers' day-to-day expenses and the decision by the government to provide the industry with a stimulus package that would allow it to provide this support. Our research notes that the more privileged sections of the garment workforce, those working in registered factories, benefited from these provisions. Those in small, unregistered factories suffered the same fate as informal workers: deprived of their jobs and left to cope on their own. Our previous research on domestic workers highlighted what this meant for some of the most vulnerable workers in

⁷ <https://www.industrialunion.org/tripartite-effort-on-fire-safety-in-bangladesh>

the economy. The instrumental need to support garment workers because of their role in generating the country's foreign exchange should not prevent the government from paying greater attention to the needs of the country's other workers. Taijul, one of the garment workers in this study, suggested that the government should support the basic needs of its entire population, its workers and its citizens. He was, in other words, arguing for a broad-based safety net approach that reflected the government's obligations rather than the country's foreign exchange needs. An ex-ante approach to the provision of such a safety net would have avoided the suffering of the most vulnerable workers, and will protect them in the face of future crises. This is a lesson that policymakers in Bangladesh need to learn from the experiences of this pandemic.

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Table 1: Distribution of Work Trajectories in the Post-Lockdown Period

	Category of workers	All	Male	Female	Small factory	Large factory	BGMEA member	Accord member
1.	Rejoined the same factory	21	2	19	6	15	18	10 (one not sure)
2.	Lost/quit job and joined another RMG factory	4	3	1	3	1	3	3
3.	Lost/quit job and changed occupation	8	5	3	3*	5*	2	2
4.	Lost/quit job and remained unemployed	7	0	7**	5	2	4	1

* Two lost jobs and one quit job amongst small factory workers. These three factories are not members of BGMEA or Accord. One female and one male RMG worker lost jobs from large factories (both foreign factories) and three male RMG workers quit jobs from large factories.

** Two female RMG workers quit their jobs for their own reasons and five female RMG workers lost their jobs.

Appendix

Table A1: Respondent Profile

Sl. No.	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Respondent's current salary (BDT)	Occupation and salary of other HH members 1. Husband 2. Wife 3. Parents 4. Siblings 5. Son or/and daughter	Marital status	Education	First migrated to the city with?	Reason for migration	HH size	HH members	Any dependents back in the village? Who?	Factory size	BGMEA registration status
1	Roksana	26	Female	1,000	Husband is a worker at a furniture shop; earns around BDT 12,000	Married	No education	Husband	Search of RMG work	2	3; her daughter lives with her in-laws	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
2	Rehana	26	Female	11,500	Sole earner; earns BDT 11–11,500 per month	Unmarried	8 th grade	She was born and brought up in Savar; her parents migrated when they were young	Did not migrate; was born and brought up in Dhaka	4	4	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered

3	Aklima	33	Female	No data	Husband is a rickshaw puller; earns BDT 9,000 or 10,000 per month	Married	No education	Husband	Search of any kinds of work	2	2	No	Small factory	Unregistered
4	Renu Begum	33	Female	10,000	Husband is a stonemason; earns BDT 10,000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work and for children's better education	4	4	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
5	Bedana	28	Female	10,116	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 10,000 per month	Married	No education, only can write her name	Husband	Search of work	2	6; her 2 sons and parents live in the village	Yes	Small factory	BGMEA registered
6	Shiuli	19	Female	10,100	Husband is an RMG worker (operator); earns BDT 14,300 per month	Married	5 th grade	Husband	Search of work	2	5; she and her husband live in the city and the other 3 members (her daughter, parents-in-law) live in the village	Yes	Large factory	BGMEA registered
7	Rabeya Akter	25	Female	8,000	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 8,000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work	2	Husband	Daughter and mother	Large factory	BGMEA registered

8	Sonia	20	Female	No data	Father is a rickshaw puller and 1 sister and 1 brother do odd jobs	Unmarried	No data	Parents	Search of work	6	Parents and siblings	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
9	Popy Akter	25	Female	12,000	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 12,000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work	2	Husband	Daughter and parents-in-law	Large factory	BGMEA registered
10	Anjuman	35	Female	No data	Husband earns BDT 15,000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work	6	Husband, son, daughter, parents-in-law	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
11	Rita	24	Female	6,000	Husband is a carpenter (BDT 10,000 per month)	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work	2	Husband	Two son and parents-in-law	Small factory	Unregistered
12	Molina	30	Female	11,000	Sole earner; earns BDT 10,500–11,000 per month	Widow	No data	Husband	Search of work	4	Son, daughter, and mother-in-law	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
13	Momena Khatun	30	Female	No data	Husband is a sawmill worker; earns BDT 10,000 per month	Married	No data	Alone	Search of work	6	Husband, two children, and parents-in-law	Parents-in-law	Small factory	BGMEA registered
14	Parvin	29	Female	9,000	Husband is a garment worker (cutting	Married	No data	No data	No data	6	Husband, 2 sons, daughter,	Parents	Small factory	BGMEA registered

					man); earns BDT 18,000 per month; Daughter is an RMG worker; earns BDT 10,000 per month							mother-in- law		
15	Shoheli Akter	35	Female	No data	Husband is a day labourer	Married	No data	Family	No data	5	Husband and three daughters	Yes but unclear who	Large factory	BGMEA registered
16	Anoara	27	Female	1,800	Husband is a rickshaw puller; son is an unpaid garage worker	Married	No data	Parents	No data	4	Husband and 2 sons	Father	Small factory	Unregistered
17	Jinnat	23	Female	9,700	Husband is a street food (<i>fuchka, jhal muri</i>) seller and earns BDT 8,000–12,000 per month	Married	No data	No data	Search of work	3	Husband, son	Yes	Large factory	BGMEA registered
18	Majeza	45	Female	2,500	Husband is a rickshaw puller; earns around BDT 8,000 per month	Married	No data	Alone	Search of work	5	Husband, 2 daughters, 1 son	No	Large factory	Unregistered (Indian company)

19	Rumana	19	Female	2,000	Husband is a rickshaw puller; earns around BDT 8,000 per month	Married	No data	Friend	Search of work	5	Husband, two children, and mother	No	Small factory	Unregistered
20	Laizu	33	Female	8,300	Husband is an RMG worker (works at the dyeing department) and earns BDT 8,000–10,000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work	3	Husband, one child, and mother	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
21	Liza	25	Female	16,000	Husband is an auto-rickshaw driver; earns BDT 16,000–17,000 per month	Married	5 th grade	Husband	Search of work	3	Husband, one child	Yes (parents)	Large factory	BGMEA registered
22	Sahinur	25	Female	9,100	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 9,000–10,000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Search of work	5	Husband, one child, parents-in-law	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
23	Resma	25	Female	15,000	Husband does masonry work, and earns BDT 11,000 or	Married	8 th grade	Husband	Search of work	3	Husband and son	Parents-in-law	Large factory	BGMEA registered

					12,000 per month									
24	Rubina	25	Female	No data	Father is a day labourer in the village	Divorced	5 th grade	Alone	Search of work	4	Parents and 2 daughters	No	Small factory	Unregistered
25	Dilara	26	Female	No data	Father is an <i>Imam</i> (prayer leader at a mosque)	Divorced	HSC	Husband	Search of work	3	Parents	No	Small factory	BGMEA registered
26	Khadiza	31	Female	16,000	Husband is a rickshaw puller; earns BDT 8,000–9000 per month	Married	No data	Husband	Children's education	6	Husband and 4 sons	No	Small factory	Unregistered
27	Shahanaz	19	Female	11,100	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 10,000–16,000 per month	Married	5 th grade	Aunt and mother	Search of work	2	Husband	Yes (mother-in-law)	Small factory	Unregistered
28	Momtaz	25	Female	1,500 by rearing livestock	Respondent earns money by rearing livestock and works as a day labourer; Father is a farmer	Divorced	5 th grade	Alone	Search of work	5	Parents, son, and sister	No	Small factory	Unregistered

29	Ashiya	29	Female	10,116	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 10,000 per month	Married	No education	Husband	Search of work	6	Husband, parents, 2 sons	Two sons, her parents, and parents-in-law	Small factory	BGMEA registered
30	Suborna	25	Female	9,100	Husband is an RMG worker; earns BDT 10,000 per month	Married	6 th grade	Husband	Search of work	6	Husband, parents-in-law, and 2 sons	Parents-in-law	Large factory	BGMEA registered
31	Joynal	60	Male	15,000	Both sons work with him at his grocery shop	Married	No education	Parents	Search of work	2	5	Mother	Part of a large factory	Unregistered
32	Mamun	22	Male	6,000	Father does business (buys and sells seasonal crops)	Married	9 th grade	Alone	Search of work	2	4	No	Large factory	BGMEA registered
33	Sujon	23	Male	13,000	Sister is an RMG worker	Unmarried	No data	Alone	Search of work	1	3	Mother	Large factory	BGMEA registered
34	Salam	33	Male	8,000	Father does agricultural work; Wife works as a seamstress	Married	No data	Alone	Search of work	1	5	Parents	Large factory	BGMEA registered
35	Rafiq	33	Male	17,000	Sole earner	Married	No data	With Cousin	Search of work	1	3	Yes, parents and siblings	Small factory	BGMEA registered

36	Sumon	20	Male	7,500	Brother does agriculture work	Married	No data	Family	Search of work	1	6	Yes, whole family	Small factory	Unregistered
37	Jahangir	27	Male	19,000	Sole earner	Married	HSC	Fellow Villagers	Search of work	4	Wife, father, mother	Yes, parents and wife	Large factory	BGMEA registered
38	Rony	23	Male	13,000	Father does business (buys and sells wood); Brother is an RMG worker	Unmarried	SSC	No data	No data	6	Father, mother, one sister, and two brothers	Yes	Small factory	BGMEA registered
39	Robiul	30	Male	11,500	Wife is an RMG worker (works as an operator)	Married	No data	No data	No data	8	Wife, son, father, mother, two brothers, and sister-in-law	Yes	Small factory	Unregistered (Chinese company)
40	Taijul	23	Male	9,000	Father runs a tea stall	Unmarried	No data	No data	No data	5	Father, mother, and two sisters	Yes	Large factory	Unregistered (Chinese company)