

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE, HEALTH & VACCINATION CONDITIONS OF RMG WORKERS: FINDINGS FROM A RAPID SURVEY

Syeda Salina Aziz, Pragyna Mahpara, Mahid Labib

November 2021



The ready-made garments (RMG) sector is the highest earner of foreign currency in Bangladesh. In 2020, 84% of the country's export earnings came from the RMG sector¹.

During the first year of COVID-19, the RMG sector faced many layoffs and salary cuts. A recent estimate by Mapped in Bangladesh (MIB) and Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) shows that between pre-Covid (December 2019) and Covid period (September 2020), over 50 per cent of RMG enterprises have fewer workers in September 2020 compared to pre-Covid period. Overall, workers who lost jobs during this period was about 14%². About 14% more workers lost jobs during Jan-Sept 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. The workers were exposed to health risks as factories were opened during the government-induced lockdown without taking adequate safety measures. The sector received considerable financial aid from the government for the workers, although it is unclear how much of the aid eventually reached the workers. In 2021, the second year of the pandemic, the RMG factories are operating in full swing and health protocols have been compromised. The government has also started a priority-based vaccination for RMG workers in July 2020 ((Express, n.d.).

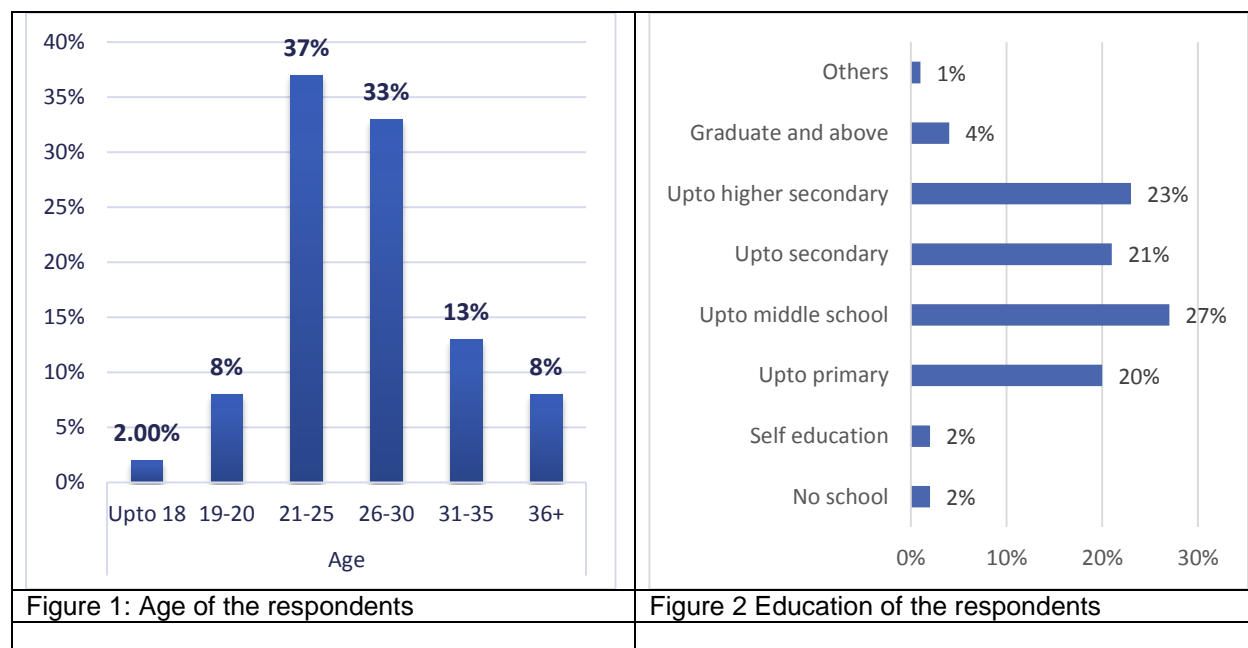
This paper examines the RMG workers' income and employment status, work environment, compliance with health and safety measures taken by authorities, and vaccination status from April to July of 2021. This survey was conducted over telephone with the RMG workers located in Savar, Dhaka division, based on a previous

¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42943-022-00049-9>

² <https://cpd.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Vulnerability-Resilience-and-Recovery-in-Readymade-Garment-Enterprises-of-Bangladesh.pdf>

database of a panel telephonic survey conducted by BIGD during March 2020- March 2021 (Boudreau, Heath, Rahman 2021).

Starting with a sample frame of 2,800 workers, with a response rate of 64%, excluding officials and people who are either not employed or have left the RMG sector, the survey ended up interviewing 1,598 people. The survey was conducted in July 2021.



SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The survey had a 50/50 male-female distribution. About 80% belonged to the age groups below or up to 30, and the mean age was 27 years. About 70% of the respondents in the survey were married. The education distribution showed that about 47% of the respondents had some sort of school education or completed up to middle school, while 44% have education between class 9 to higher secondary.

2. EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME:

From April to July 2021, about 13% (N=232) of the respondents shifted jobs. Among them, 47% were working in the RMG sector, 13% changed their occupation, and the rest 40% were not employed when the survey was conducted. Of those who have been employed in the RMG sector, 80% had permanent jobs and the rest were contractual or temporary workers.

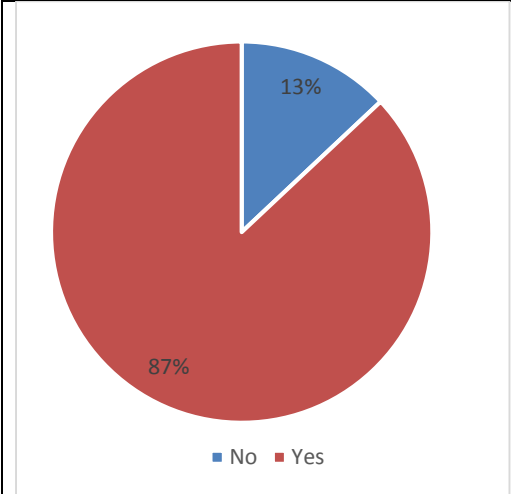


Figure 3: Are you working in the same factory as before?

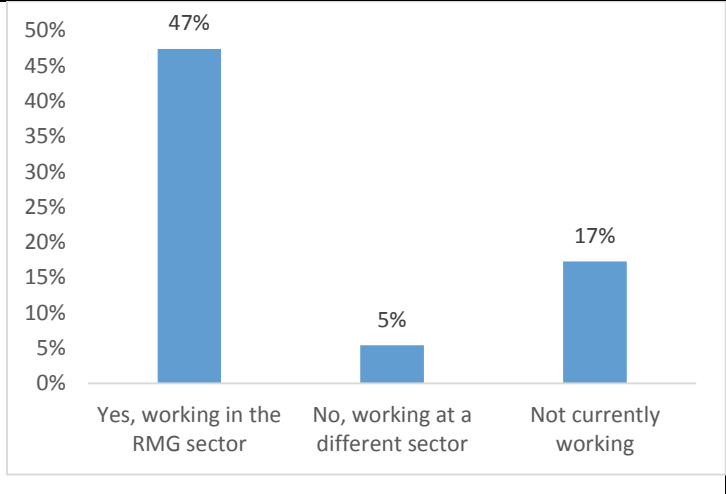


Figure 4: Employment status of those who have switched job

JOB LOSS DURING COVID-19

About 7% (N=112) of the respondents were terminated or lost their jobs from March 2020 to July 2021. Among them, about 77% were laid off temporary or permanent due to Covid-19. Fewer female workers, as reported, were terminated compared to male workers. While most of the temporarily laid-off employees got paid, about half of the permanently terminated employees did not receive any compensation. For the majority (87%) workers who faced temporary lay-off, the layoffs lasted for a month; for the rest 13% the layoffs lasted for more than a month. The average compensation received for the temporarily terminated employee is Tk 8,178, while the one-time compensation for permanently terminated employees was Tk 18,307.

The month-wide disaggregation in salary does not reveal any particular pattern, though it shows that about 5% of the workers experienced some delays in salary disbursement during this period.

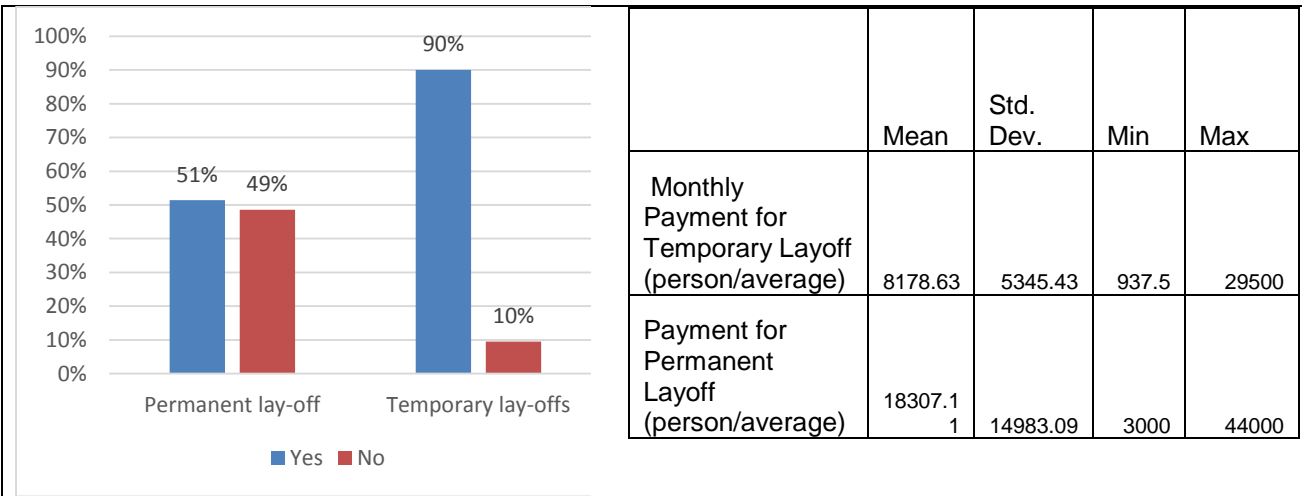


Figure 7: Payment received during the lay-off

Table 8: Descriptive stat of compensation received during the lay-off

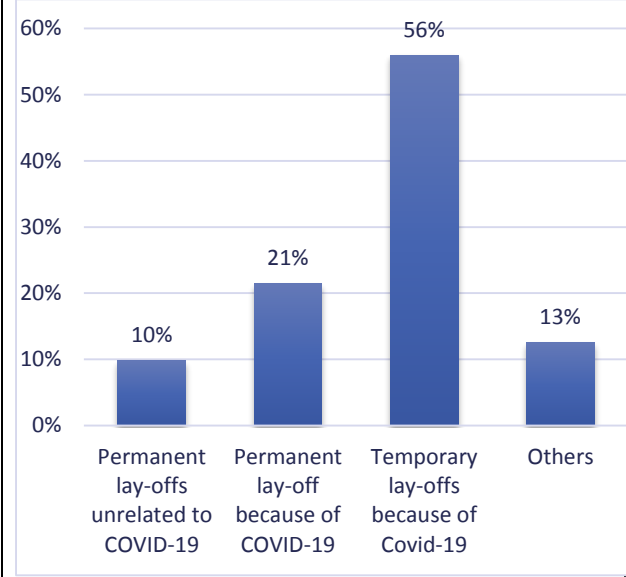


Figure 5: Lay-offs during Covid-19 (March 2020-July 2021)

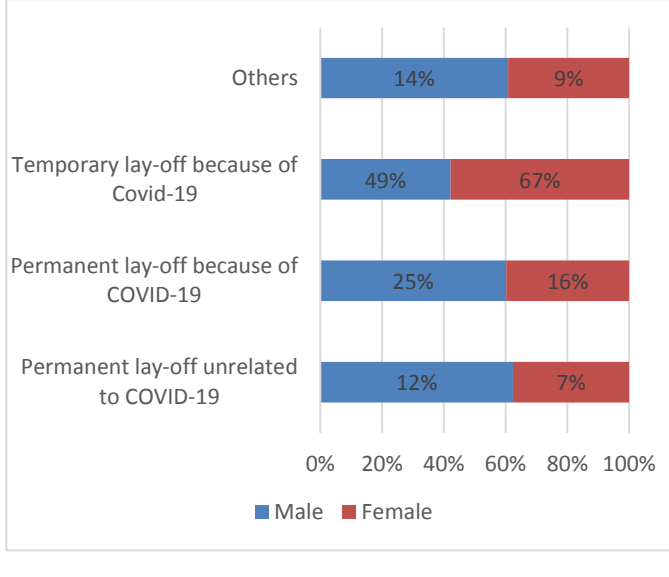


Figure 6: Payment received during the lay-off

GETTING HELP DURING COVID-19

Only about 2% of respondents said that they have trade union membership. During COVID-19, only 5% of respondents received assistance from the government; another 3% got aid from other associations including trade unions. They also reported receiving other help: about 16% received assistance from trade unions to ensure healthcare and about 13% received advice regarding health and financial issues.

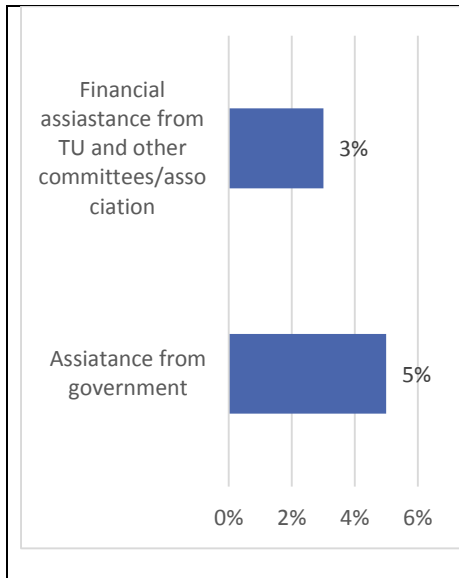


Figure 9: Financial assistance received during Covid-19

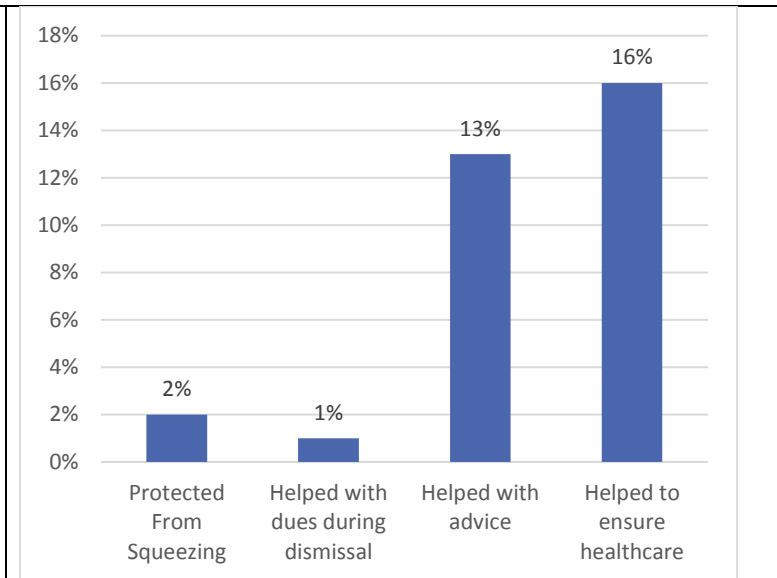


Figure 10: Other types of assistance received from TUs and other types of associations

LOCKDOWN AND IMPACT ON THE WORKPLACE:

In 2021, the government enforced a nationwide lockdown from 5th April to 10th August to curb the spread of COVID-19. The RMG factories were mostly operating defying the lockdown and later, on July 23, the government imposed a 14-day shutdown on the RMG factory operation. But, a week after the decision, the government made a sudden declaration on 30th July, instructing the factories to start their operations from 1st August. As many of the workers were out of Dhaka during this lockdown, the sudden declaration came as a shock to them, and they had to rush back to the capital amid the transport ban and high risk of getting infected by COVID-19.

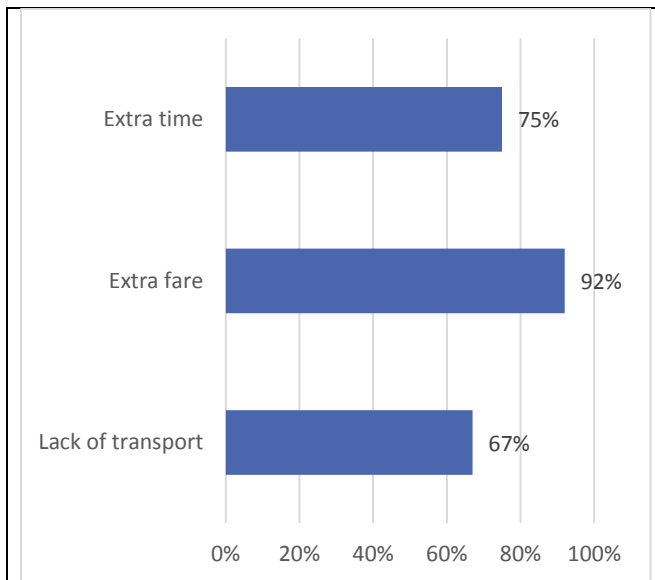


Figure 11: Problems faced while traveling to home during lockdown

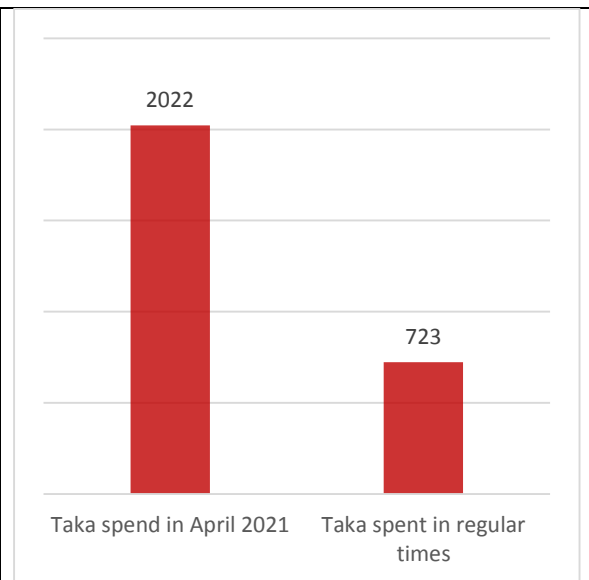


Figure 12: Average money spent on transport (one-way)

The survey shows that about 70% of factories were closed during the lockdown, about 28% were not closed at all, and only 2% were closed more than once. About 51% of the respondents returned to native homes during lockdown while 49% stayed back in the cities. During the commute, 92% paid an extra fare, 75% spent more time travelling than usual, and 67% faced a lack of transportation. The survey also shows that during that period, workers had to pay Tk 2,021 transport bill which is about 3 times higher than their usual transport cost.

Other than the extremely high fare, RMG workers had to endure other impacts of the lockdown. For instance, about 39% of respondents said they had to cut down their food consumption due to price increases, and about 22% reported consuming less food as income went down. Others impacts include problems in buying food due to market closure and difficulties owing to a shortage of supply in the market.

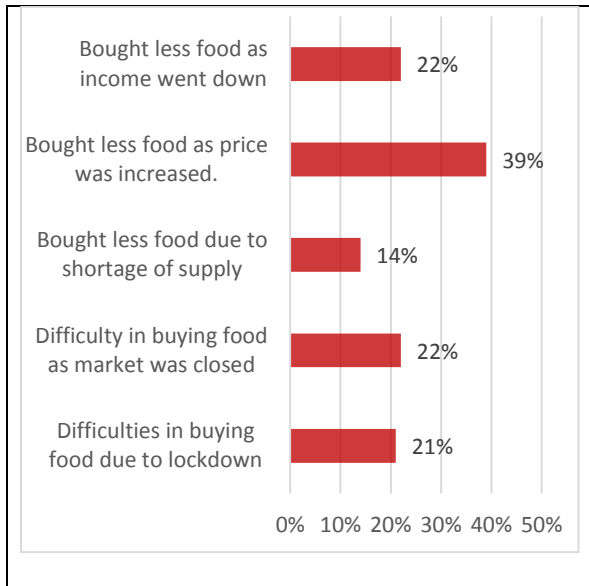


Figure 13: Impact of lockdown on food consumption

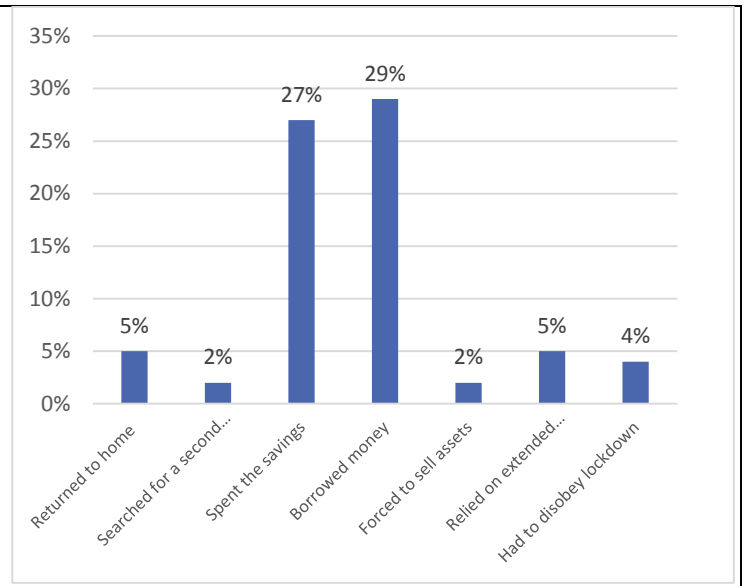
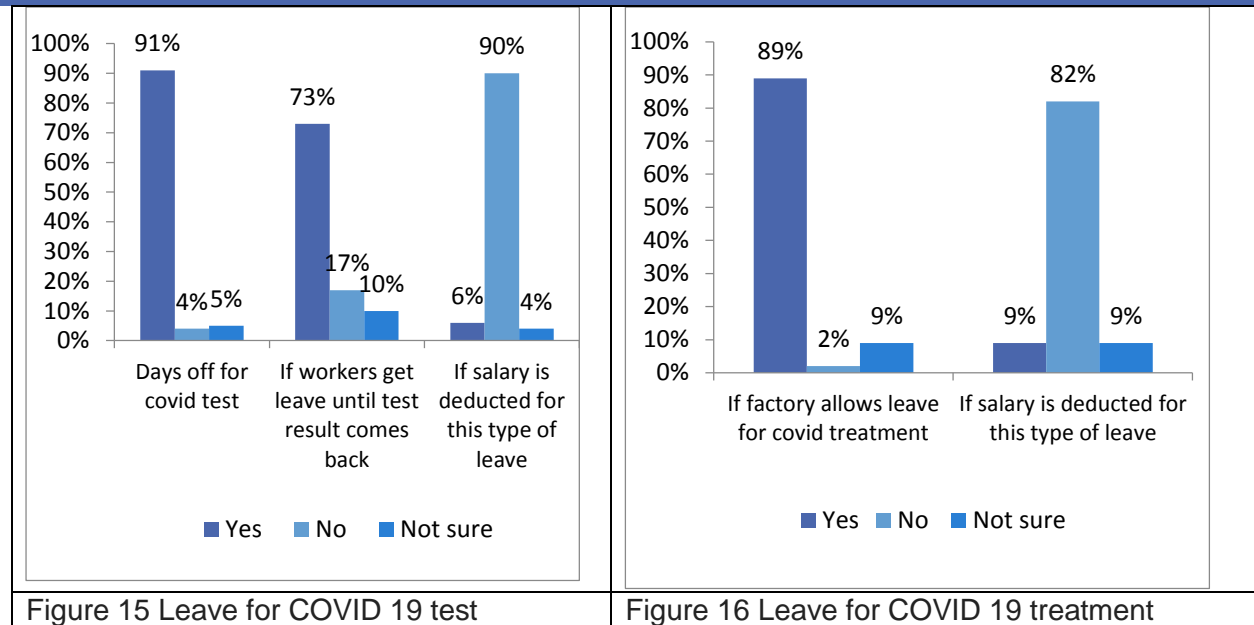


Figure 14: Impact of lockdown

WORK ENVIRONMENT DURING COVID-19



When respondents were asked whether their factories provided leaves for taking the Covid-19 test, about 91% of respondents reported that their factories allowed leave for taking the COVID-19 test while 4% said that their factories did not allow leaves, and 5% was not very sure about the practice. About 73% of workers said their factories allowed leaves until they received COVID-19 test results, and 17% said otherwise. About 90% (N= 1037) of those who reported being allowed to take leaves until results came out said workers' salaries of their factories were not deducted, while the other 6% reported otherwise. Similarly, workers were asked if their factories allowed days off for treatment in case of infection. About 89% of respondents said that the workers in their respective factories were provided with leaves, while only 2% reported not to be allowed to take leaves, and 9% were unsure of this type of leave. Additionally, among those who responded yes (89%), 82% (N= 1154) reported that workers in their factory did not face any salary cut for being on leave while taking treatment for COVID-19. On the other hand, 9% (N=128) reported that workers in their respective factories faced salary cuts, which mirror the figure for those who are unsure (9%). In both types of leave (for testing and treatment), there was no significant difference between males and females who faced salary cuts. A series of qualitative interviews with RMG workers also revealed that they are allowed to take leaves for testing and in case they are affected with Covid-19, but this depends on the available medical/casual leaves that come with the contract. Once the regular medical leaves are depleted, they do face salary cuts or have to do replacement days.

With all these cases of COVID-19, an important question was related to job security. When asked if any worker was fired for contracting COVID-19, 89% replied they did not get fired, 3% confirmed being fired, and the remaining 8% were unsure as to whether anyone was fired. Respondents were also asked if they witnessed any type of violent behaviour, e.g., physical/verbal abuse from the supervisor. About 16% of respondents witnessed violent behaviour almost daily, and 21% said they were subjected to violence at least once a month. These figures highlight that violent behaviour from superiors in the workplace is still a concern for many.

HEALTH AND SAFETY MEASURES AT THE WORKPLACE

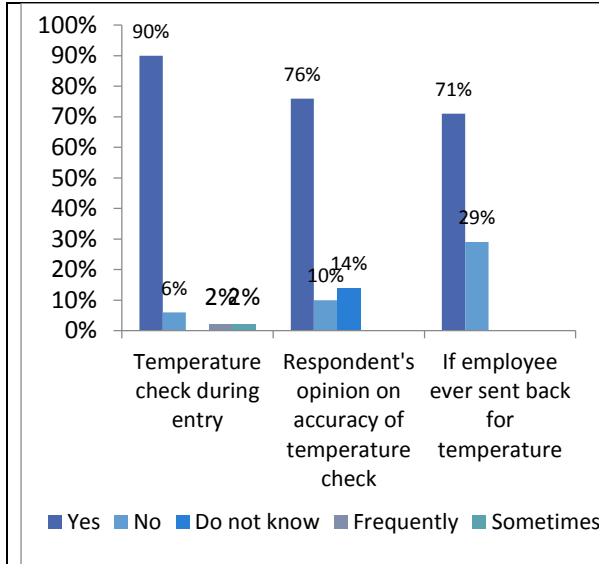


Figure 17 Temperature check in factories

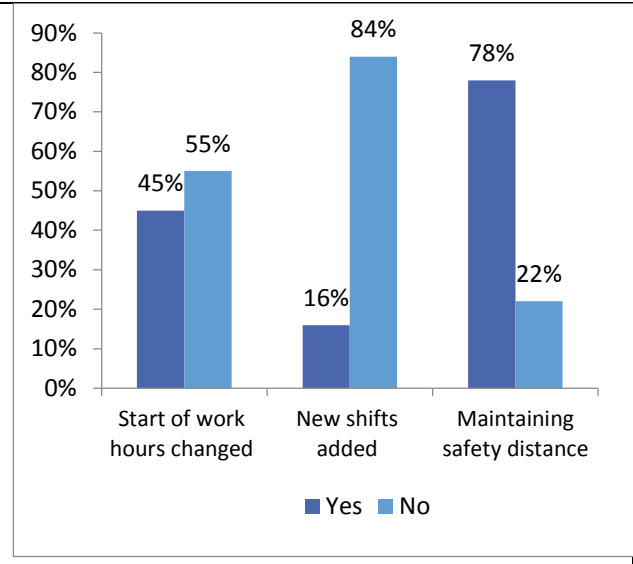


Figure 18 Safety Measures at Workplace

A temperature check while entering the workplace is a standard procedure maintained during COVID-19. When asked if this measure was implemented at the factories, 90% of workers said that this was done daily, while 4% said it was done frequently or sometimes. In contrast, 6% did not have their temperatures checked during entry. Those who did have their temperatures checked daily or frequently were additionally asked their opinion regarding the accuracy of the check and whether anyone was sent home because of high temperature. About 76% of workers opined the temperature checks were accurate; with 10% thinking the temperature checks were inaccurate, and 14% unsure of the accuracy. In case of high temperatures, 71% of respondents reported they were sent home while 29% said they were not sent home.

About 77% of the workers said they were provided face masks by their employers. This was followed by how frequently workers wore their masks. About 78% said they always wore their masks, while 18% said they wore masks most of the time, and approximately 5% wore them for short periods. A very small percentage (about 0.13%) never wore masks at the workplace.

When asked about the safety measures taken to prevent COVID-19 infections at the workplace, 45% said that the starting time changed to avoid congestion while 55% said it did not change. Only 16% reported that new shifts were added to reduce worker density while 84% reported that no new shifts were added.

When asked if proper safety distance was maintained, 78% responded that safety distance was maintained in contrast to 22% reported otherwise. About 92% said they were instructed to maintain a safe distance. Around 61% said they received some sort of safety training on COVID-19, and 35% said they did not, leaving approximately 4% unsure about the fact.

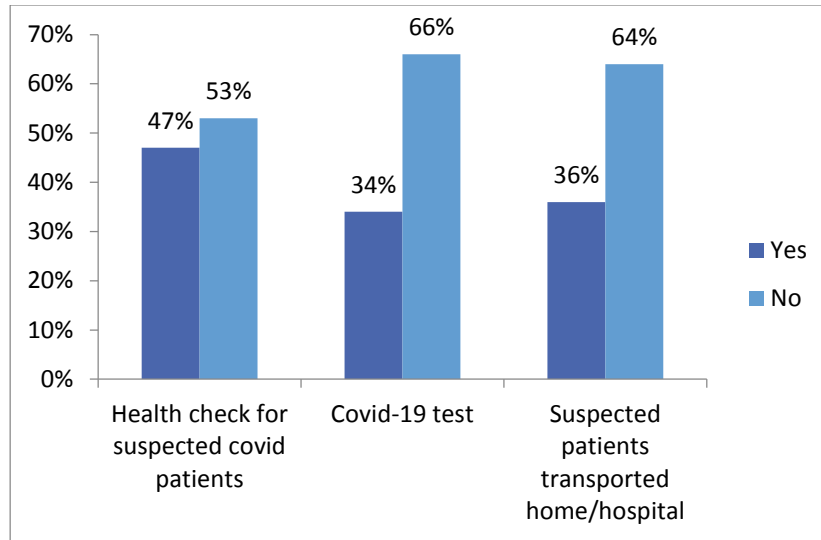


Figure 19 Health Services at Factories

Respondents were asked if any of the services mentioned in figure 19 was made available at the medical centre of their factory or any factory-associated medical centre. Around 47% said that health checks for suspected COVID-19 patients (with Covid-19 like symptoms) were available while 53% reported otherwise. At least 34% said COVID-19 tests were available, and 66% said tests were not available. Lastly, 36% reported that transportation was available for suspected patients while 64% responded otherwise. Despite having these services available, when asked if the workers ever consulted with the factory's health unit regarding COVID-19 symptoms, 94% said that they did not, and only 6% said that they did consult the health unit in this regard.

VACCINATION OF WORKERS DURING COVID 19

The government began the COVID-19 vaccination in January 2021, which eventually led to mass vaccination from February 2021. When factories started operations with large numbers of unvaccinated workers, vaccination of workers became a priority. Trade unions and labour rights organizations mobilized and demanded the vaccination of workers, as most of the workers remained unvaccinated. Finally, in August 2021, the government and factory owners started working together to vaccinate RMG workers.

The survey wanted to explore the vaccination profile of workers. When asked about COVID-19 vaccination, 95% of workers said that they did not get vaccines, while only 2.8% of workers had taken the first shot and 2.09% had taken both the shots. Among the unvaccinated workers, 20% had registered for the vaccine, while 80% had not. However, 88% of the workers expressed their eagerness to take the vaccine in the future. Since an overwhelming majority reported not being vaccinated, 95% male and 95% female were reported to be unvaccinated at the time of the survey.

The unvaccinated workers were asked about their willingness to get vaccinated. In response, about 11% said that they were not willing to take the vaccine in the future. This is because 44% of them felt that the vaccine will cause physical harm. Around 14% felt that they had no chance of getting contaminated with COVID-19; 13% felt that there will be no harm in getting infected; 6% felt that the vaccine is not effective; and about 2% felt that the vaccine is fake.

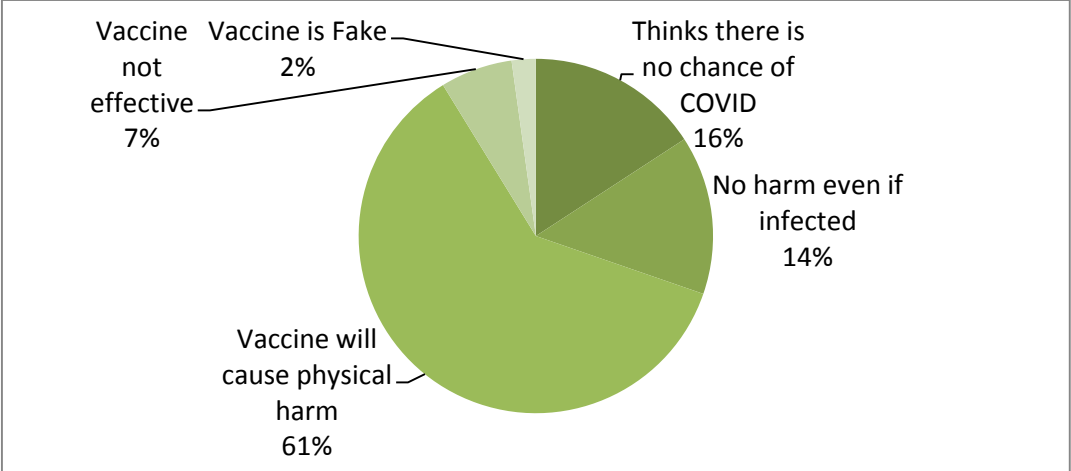


Figure 20 Workers' perceptions on vaccine

Often post-vaccination side effects such as fever surface in vaccinated people. The survey explored whether vaccinated workers could get time off from their work if they faced similar symptoms. Around 64% said they faced side effects while 33% said they did not. Around 51% of the workers could take leave if they faced the side effects. The rest 49% of workers reported they did not take any leave, as most of them (92%) felt they did not need a day off.

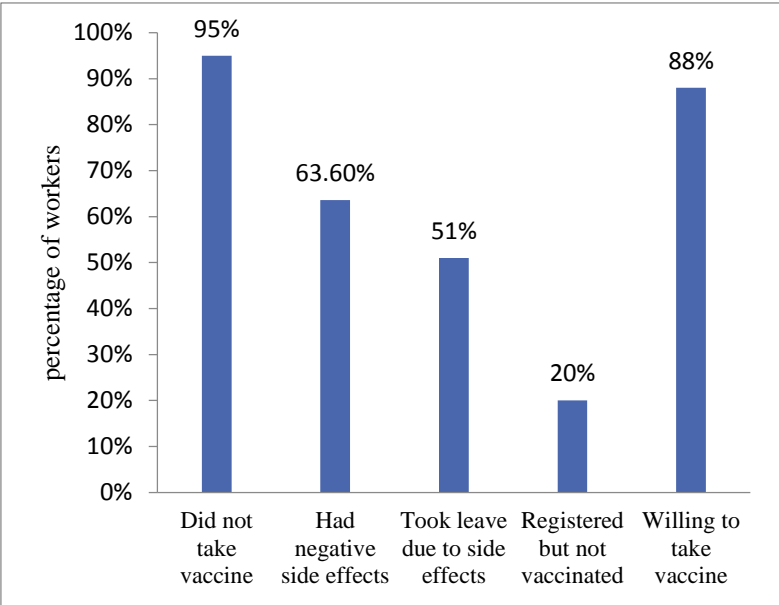


Figure: Vaccination Profile of Workers 21

Further to understanding the vaccination profile of workers, it was important to unpack the contribution of factories in ensuring vaccination for workers. The survey therefore wanted to explore whether the factories made vaccination mandatory for workers. Around 32% of workers reported that their factories had made vaccination mandatory, and 64% reported otherwise. However, 5% of the workers were unsure about this. When asked whether their factories had facilitated vaccination for workers, 40% reported that their factories did, as opposed to the 50% who reported otherwise and 10% of the workers who were unsure if their factories had facilitated vaccination.