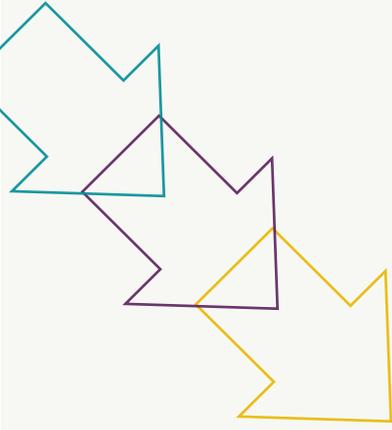
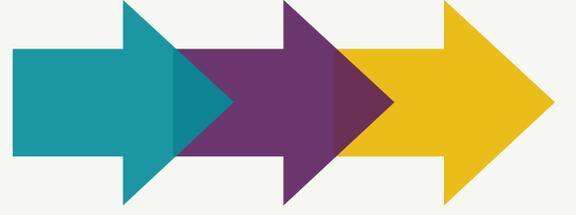


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Covid-19 Learning, Evidence
and Research Programme

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কোভিড-১৯ লার্নিং, এভিডেন্স
অ্যান্ড রিসার্চ প্রোগ্রাম



Research Briefing

The Impact of Covid-19 on Labour Rights and Working Conditions in Four Selected Sectors

April 2022

The Impact of Covid-19 on Labour Rights and Working Conditions in Four Selected Sectors

This research briefing summarises priority areas for future research as well as key stakeholders with whom to engage, as identified in the scoping paper *Impact of Covid-19 on Labour Rights and Working Conditions in Four Selected Sectors* by Mirza M. Hassan, Syeda Salina Aziz, Raeesa Rahemin, Insiya Khan and Rafsanul Hoque from the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD). The scoping paper and this briefing were commissioned for the Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme in Bangladesh (CLEAR). CLEAR aims to build a consortium of research partners to deliver policy-relevant research and evidence for Bangladesh to support the Covid-19 response and inform preparation for future shocks.

Labour rights and working conditions in the context of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic, along with measures to control the virus, have disrupted regular public and economic activities and adversely impacted the vast majority of the labour force in terms of job insecurity, health and safety, and workplace rights. The income of vulnerable people has been severely affected, particularly in cities, and a group of 'new poor' has emerged. Some occupation groups have been more severely affected than others with small and informal enterprises and especially female labour-based work being hit harder. Within the formal sectors, transport has been impacted immensely.

Generally, workers' rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining are yet to be fully established across sectors. As a result, workers have struggled to compel the state authority to implement policies and strategies to protect their livelihoods.

The labour rights, wages, employment conditions, and the safety and security of workers are explored through four specific sectors – road transport, ready-made garments (RMG), beauty parlours, and street vending – in order to assess how the pandemic has impacted working conditions, and how well the existing research and media reports reflect the situation. Based on this analysis, potential evidence gaps, research needs, and policy opportunities to improve working conditions and workers' rights within the selected sectors are identified.

1 The road transport sector

In general, transport sector workers have no employment contracts, are subject to long working hours and wages that are paid by the day, and have no overtime or other benefits sanctioned. The trade unions are strong but they barely represent workers' interests. The Covid-19-induced lockdown period was particularly devastating for the road transport sector. The average transport worker received as low as

26 per cent of their usual payment. The government had no targeted programmes to support transport workers during the pandemic, and no such effort was made by the business owners and labour unions.

Existing data gaps and research opportunities

There is a limited number of studies on the impact of the pandemic on the transport sector. Studies on working conditions, health and safety, and the state of collective bargaining arrangements are almost non-existent. Most of the existing studies rely on newspapers for their data sources. Among the very few 'knowledge-producing actors', the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) and the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) are the main actors. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank produce updates and reports on economic aspects of the transport sector.

Useful research to inform action in this regard could cover the following areas:

- Large-scale data and survey-based work to understand the impacts on livelihoods and working conditions for transport workers.
- Ensuring the social security of transport workers.
- Rights of association and collective bargaining.

Key stakeholders

The Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) is the formal body for transport policy and planning whilst the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) covers the registration of vehicles and training drivers. Dhaka North and South city corporations manage parking and open spaces and the police enforce traffic rules. More directly involved on labour issues is the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE), which oversees wages and the health and safety of workers. The Road Transport

Workers' Federation (RTWF) represents collective bargaining agencies whilst the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association (BRTOA) and the Dhaka Road Transport Owners' Association (DRTOA) protect the interests of bus companies and owners.

2 The ready-made garment (RMG) sector

The RMG industry is one of the largest and most important sectors for Bangladesh. During the Covid-19 period, the government gave a stimulus package to the garment sector, for the workers, amounting to BDT 50bn (about €500m) to support the industry and mitigate the economic shock caused by the pandemic.

Existing data gaps and research opportunities

The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and emphasised the need to focus on issues such as workers' health and safety, job security, and working conditions.

There is little research and discussion on how Covid-19 continues to impact garment workers' employment security and future. What research exists fails to make important distinctions in how workers are paid. For example, sweater and knit industry workers are paid on a piece-rate basis so they were more impacted by the loss of orders due to the pandemic.

There is no concrete data on how many factories were affected by the pandemic, how many closed down permanently, how many jobs have now been lost or gained, and what changes have been made to the rights of workers and freedom of association. Studies discuss the economic impact and future of the RMG industry, but rarely consider workers' rights and livelihoods.

Further studies could be conducted to better understand the role of trade unions in workers' social protection, and to understand what the obstacles are and how they can be overcome.

Key stakeholders

The RMG sector, given its economic importance and size, has many key stakeholders. The MoLE, the Department of Labour and Employment (DoLE), and the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) are among the most important government stakeholders. Factory owners, through the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), tend to have a high influence in policymaking. Trade unions in this sector are generally politicised, divided, and less capable of protecting workers' rights. Moreover, factory management has taken initiatives to

discourage and obstruct workers from unionising. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and thinktanks such as BILS support social causes and initiatives for workers, undertake research, and make policy recommendations but have more limited influence. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is prominent among international agencies taking an interest in labour rights and employment.

3 The beauty parlour sector

The beauty parlour sector, despite being in existence for a very long time, has only recently been recognised as an industrial sector. An estimated 100,000 workers, mostly women, are employed in this sector, which runs on an informal arrangement between the workers and owners. There are no written contracts between parlour workers and owners, resulting in violations of workers' rights in every parlour in the form of extended working hours, absence of formal salary, leave, and benefit policies. During the pandemic, most staff were on unpaid leave when all parlours were forced to close their doors.

Existing data gaps and research opportunities

There is a significant lack of research conducted on the beauty industry in Bangladesh. Karmojibi Nari, BIGD, and the ILO are the only three organisations that have researched the sector. The following might be considered for future research in the sector:

- Research on what constitutes workers' rights in this sector.
- The mapping of beauty parlours to establish their numbers, location, numbers of workers, working conditions, and safety and security conditions would provide a useful evidence baseline for future research and decision-making.
- Studies to explore the scope and design of social protection measures for beauty parlour workers.
- Evidence on barriers to collective action by workers and to increasing awareness among workers of their rights.

Key stakeholders

The Ministry of Commerce is the key agency responsible for overseeing the beauty industry. The city corporations provide trade licences to individual beauty parlours. DIFE is responsible for the supervision of parlours. There are a few parlour owners' associations, such as the Beauty Service Owners Association of Bangladesh and the Bangladesh Garo Beauty Parlour Owners Association. Other stakeholders include beauty parlour owners and the workers themselves.

4 Street vending

In Dhaka, street vending is an informal sector selling legal goods without formal authority or approved space to conduct business. There is no regulatory framework for the street-vending industry. Due to the informal conditions, workers suffer from being subject to rent-seeking, facing frequent evictions, poor working conditions, and lack of collective bargaining power.

Existing data gaps and research opportunities

- Studies to develop a comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting street vendors, and the nature and process of formal and informal governance are required as a baseline.
- Research on the impact of Covid-19 on the sector could focus on the conditions of the street vendors during the pandemic, emerging challenges, and the nature of possible coping strategies.
- Evidence to inform the design of social security schemes to cope with future economic shocks would add value.

Key stakeholders

The Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) are the prime authorities concerned with street vendors in the capital. Law enforcement agencies, such as the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), are also



Garment employees are seen leaving a clothing plant at the end of their working day in Bangladesh

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concerned bodies. Unions such as the National Hawker Federation (NHF), the Bangladesh Hawkers' Union, the Tejgaon Hawkers' League, and others are also important stakeholders along with research organisations such as the Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), Dhaka; the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC); the Bangladesh Urban Forum (BUF); BIGD; and BRAC University, which have all conducted studies on urban issues. However, further work is needed to fully understand how different informal and formal actors interact to affect vendors' rights.

Reference

Hassan, M.M.; Aziz, S.S.; Rahemin, R.; Khan, I. and Hoque, R. (2022) *Impact of Covid-19 on Labour Rights and Working Conditions in Four Selected Sectors*, Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development

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