

**THE IMPACT OF THE  
COVID PANDEMIC ON GARMENT  
WORKERS IN BANGLADESH**



**কর্মজীবী নারী**  
**KARMOJIBI NARI**

**FAIR**  
**WEAR**

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This report was researched and written by  
Jakir Hossain, Mostafiz Ahmed, and Afroza Akter.

Karmojibi Nari and Fair Wear would like to thank all the participants of this study.

**কর্মজীবী নারী**  
KARMOJIBI NARI

Karmojibi Nari (KN) started its journey on 1st of May, the International Labour day, in 1991. KN is still marching for its quest of women's rights and equal dignity. Over the years KN was successful in bringing formal and informal sectors workers especially the women workers under its organized forum. KN helped to strengthen their leadership capacity. The organization used advocacy strategies with concerned authorities to harmonize the existing regulations, amend and/or enact new rules. It takes active roles in effective implementation of the laws for the wellbeing of workers.

**FAIR**  
**WEAR**

Fair Wear Foundation is an international multi-stakeholder non-profit organisation that works with clothing companies—and their supply chains—to improve working conditions in the garment industry. By becoming a member of Fair Wear, a company commits to implementing the FWF Code of Labour Practices throughout its supply chain. Fair Wear strives to increase awareness about working conditions and workers' rights in textile factories. For more information, please visit [www.fairwear.org](http://www.fairwear.org).

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# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

The Covid pandemic is profoundly affecting Bangladesh's economy along with its labour market. The shutdown, or slowdown, of economic activities is impacting the income and livelihoods of the working people. Bangladesh's largest export earning sector—ready-made garments (RMG)—is of no exception. An estimate by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) shows that, due to cancellation of orders and delayed payments, the industry lost \$4.33 billion worth of exports between March and June.<sup>1</sup> This extensive cancellation or suspension of orders by international buyers and brands has pushed millions of garment workers—many of whom are women—into dire financial situations. The unforeseen crisis of Covid, and the subsequent reactions by international buyers, led to factory closures, lay-offs, workers' termination, and delays in wage payment. According to a report by the Centre of Policy Dialogue (CPD), 357,450 workers were laid off or terminated due to Covid.<sup>2</sup> A study by Penn State University's Center for Global Workers Rights and the Worker Rights Consortium reported that more than one million garment workers were fired or furloughed, 72 percent without severance pay.<sup>3</sup> The official statistics differ. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) prepared crisis report which provides information on the number of RMG factories shutdowns and terminated and lay-off workers during the COVID-19 crisis (from mid-March till September 17, 2020). According to the report, 90 thousand workers lost their jobs as a result of order cancellation or delayed payment; among them 43,049 workers (in 117 factories) have lost their jobs due to factory shutdown, 23,560 workers have been terminated from 75 factories, and 23,523 workers of 26 factories have been laid off.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the loss of income has been devastating, pushing many further into poverty.

Social dialogue practiced during Covid in the RMG sector reveals that bipartite and tripartite negotiations held between the social dialogue partners led to discussions on the crisis, including factory shutdowns, lay-offs, termination of workers, and delay in wage payment, but the proposals by the workers' representatives have not been properly addressed by the employers and government, and the decisions taken in the negotiations were not fully enforced.<sup>5</sup> These issues, and the lack of action and

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<sup>1</sup> The Financial Express, RMG export earnings in July 1-18 total \$1.57b, (20 July 2020). Retrieved from: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/rmg-export-earnings-in-july-1-18-total-157b-1595218398>

<sup>2</sup> CPD *Vulnerability, Resilience and Recovery in the RMG Sector in view of COVID Pandemic: Findings from the Enterprise Survey* Retrieved from <https://cpd.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Presentation-on-Vulnerabilities-Resilience-and-Recovery-in-the-RMG-Enterpsies-.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Anner, Mark, *Abandoned? The Impact of Covid-19 on Workers and Businesses at the Bottom of Global Garment Supply Chains*, Center for Global Workers Rights, Penn State University, and the Worker Rights Consortium, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Crisis report September 17, prepared by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. (DIFE), 2020

<sup>5</sup> Jakir Hossain and Afroza Akter, 2020, *Mapping Social Dialogue in Apparel: Bangladesh*, School of Industrial Labour Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca: ILR, December 2020 (forthcoming).

inclusion, have led to significant labour unrest; according to DIFE, from early March 2020 to 17 September 2020, ninety factories faced labour unrest.<sup>6</sup>

In April 2020, after one-month of government-imposed lockdown, RMG factories restarted their operations with the condition of implementing a safety precaution guideline. This guideline covers workers' health and safety, medical facilities, the establishment of a Covid taskforce, physical distancing in the workplace, and the setting up of suitable quarantine and self-isolation facilities. The BGMEA also issued a general directive to member factories regarding the reopening of factories, which included provisions advising to exclude vulnerable workers or those most at risk, such as pregnant workers and workers over the age of 50, as well as paid leave for those workers. However, these health and safety measures in factories are often insufficient. Though a large number of factories arranged hand wash facilities at the factory entrance, the number is not sufficient when compared against the number of workers and safe distancing was not maintained in most of the factories on the working floor and factory entrances, increasing the risks of Covid infection amongst the workers. Moreover, there is evidence that suggests that these guidelines have not been followed; for example, there have been reports in the media that suggest that a significant number of pregnant workers have been laid off.<sup>7</sup> Reports also found that RMG workers' mental health is also affected, due to the tensions of future job insecurity and fear of becoming infected with or dying of Covid.<sup>8</sup>

To protect livelihoods and the economy during the lockdown, the Bangladesh government adopted a range of monetary and fiscal policies. Four stimulus packages, worth BDT 1213.53 billion<sup>9</sup> (approx. €11.9 billion) were provided. The government has also implemented programmes to protect jobs and wages, such as temporary interest-free loans to pay wages and allowances for workers in enterprises that export at least of 80% of their production. Bangladesh Bank has also adopted measures to ease the economic burden, including a moratorium on loan payments that lasted till 30 September 2020 and provisions that ensured the borrower would not be considered to be in default. Government allocated a BDT 50 billion (approx. €494 million) stimulus package for export-oriented industries to go towards salaries and funding of two-year loans to factory owners at 2% interest.<sup>10</sup> The European Union and the German government approved a €113million grant for around one million Bangladeshi garment workers who had either been laid off or permanently lost their jobs because of the Covid pandemic.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian: "We are on our own": Bangladesh's pregnant garment workers face the sack": <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/09/we-are-on-our-own-bangladeshs-pregnant-garment-workers-face-the-sack>

<sup>8</sup> Kabir, Humayun, The impact of Covid on Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) workers. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7454782/>

<sup>9</sup> 2020 exchange rate: 1 euro = 101 Bangladesh taka

<sup>10</sup> ILO Bangladesh, *Ibid*

Women, who make up the world's poor, are concentrated in the lowest paid, lowest power positions in the garment industry, and are therefore in a particularly perilous situation. In Bangladesh, they make up the majority of the workforce, around 55-60%, but they are rarely in positions of power. They are often young, and quite frequently the first generation of women working in the formal labour market; therefore, they face extra obstacles in realising their rights to safe, properly paid employment. Already at the lowest paid, they often do not earn enough to have accumulated a financial safety net prior to the pandemic. The impact of the loss of income goes beyond the worker themselves: women disproportionately spend their income on their family and community.<sup>11 12</sup> Moreover, women shoulder the majority of care responsibilities in the home—including child care, elderly care, and providing sick care—responsibilities which have increased due to the crisis, and shutdown of schools and health care provisions. This precarious position puts women at an increased risk of violence, harassment, and exploitation in the workplace. This is especially in relation to overtime, workplace stress and low wages. Moreover, female garment workers are often the underrepresented in social dialogue structures,<sup>13</sup> due to various obstacles, and therefore, their voice, needs and wants are often overlooked in negotiations on, for example, wages, benefits, and health and safety committees.

Covid-19 and the measures adopted has a differential effect on workers of all genders, with the consequence of limiting their work, economic opportunities, independence, and health. Measures that do not address gender inequalities during Covid-19 will disproportionately aggravate the situation of garment workers, especially women. It is imperative to integrate a gender lens into responses to help to recognise and combat the variance in impact of the pandemic as well as the distribution of resources, opportunities, constraints and power during this crisis.

While the evidence highlights that the crisis has increased economic vulnerability of working women and men — both informal and formal sectors in Bangladesh, specific evidence is not yet available that details how the garment workers in Bangladesh—predominantly women—are affected by Covid and the subsequent adopted measures.

The question this study asks is: **How are ready-made garment workers in Bangladesh, the majority of whom are women, affected by the Covid crisis?** This study tries to answer this question by looking

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<sup>11</sup> IOM *Gender, Migration and Remittances* Retrieved from: <https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/about-iom/Gender-migration-remittances-infosheet.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> ILO *Better Work impact brief: Better Work Vietnam* Retrieved from: [https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Vietnam-Impact-Brief-Rnd5\\_LR.pdf](https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Vietnam-Impact-Brief-Rnd5_LR.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> ILO *Empowering Women at Work Trade Union Policies and Practices for Gender Equality* Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---emp\\_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms\\_760529.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms_760529.pdf)



at the situation of (women) workers according to different types of (in)securities: workers' securities— employment security, income security, work security, and representation security. The different categories of (in)securities are explained in more detail below.

## **STUDY OBJECTIVES**

The core objective of this research is to measure the impact of Covid crisis on the garment workers in Bangladesh, with a particular emphasis on women garment workers, by examining four areas of workers' securities— employment, income, work, and representation. The specific objectives of research are:

- 1** Employment (in)securities: employment contract, job termination and/or job loss
- 2** Income (in)securities: wage and benefits
- 3** Work (in)securities: work and working conditions
- 4** Representation (in)securities: participation in social dialogue and workplace decision-making.

This study examines the situation of these garments workers of different types of factories in order to identify recommendations to protect female and male garments workers from the impact of Covid-19 crisis.

## **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

This research followed three phases of study implementation. During the first phase—study conceptualisation—the research team conducted a brainstorming workshop to identify relevant issues. The participants of the workshop then developed the research topic and the finalised the research methodology. The second phase—data collection—covered information and data collection through active utilisation of various research tools. The third phases involved analysis and review of the data. In the fourth phases, the report was written, shared with Fair Wear team, and opened for feedback. Upon incorporating the feedback on draft report, the study was finalised.

This research employed a mixed method approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Along with a secondary literature review, the research team carried out a questionnaire survey, key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documented two case studies that zoom in on specific issue in a worker's life. The secondary information sources

included newspaper reports, journal articles, and research work relating to condition of garment workers during the Covid pandemic in Bangladesh, with a specific focus on women garment workers.

Qualitative information was drawn from FGDs, key informant interviews, and case studies. Four FGDs were held with current ready-made sector workers, one each in Dhaka, Gazipur, and Narayanganj and Chottogram, and two, in Dhaka and Chottogram, with workers who lost their job during the COVID crisis.<sup>14</sup> Key informant interviews were carried out with policymakers, representatives of employers' association, trade unions, and labour rights NGOs. In-depth analysis of the impact of Covid on women RMG workers' life was drawn through two case studies of garment workers.

Quantitative data was obtained through a questionnaire survey administered to 500 workers (125 respondents each from Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chottogram).

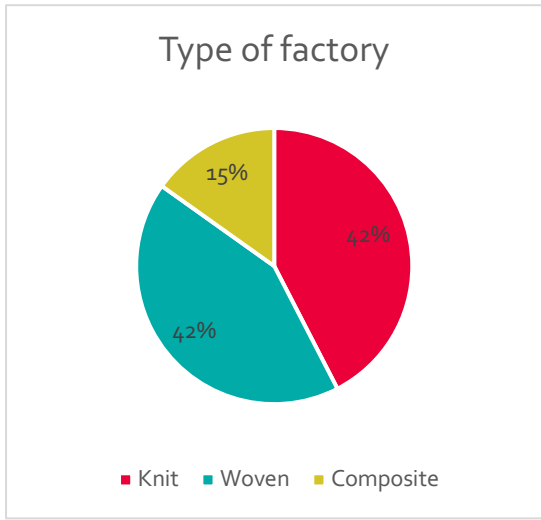
Purposive sampling was used to select female and male respondents for the survey. As female workers represent around 60 per cent of total RMG work force in Bangladesh, 60 percent of the respondents in the study were women (300 respondents), while the remaining 40 percent were men (200 respondents). Both workers who have been retrenched (those who lost their jobs) during the Covid crisis (20%; 100 respondents) and those who are still employed (80%; 400 respondents) were interviewed.<sup>15</sup> The data collection process is further elaborated in Annex Note 1.1.

The demographic profiles of the respondents (Annex Table 1.2) shows that the majority of workers (88%) are in the 18 to 35 age bracket, and majority of respondents are married (72%).

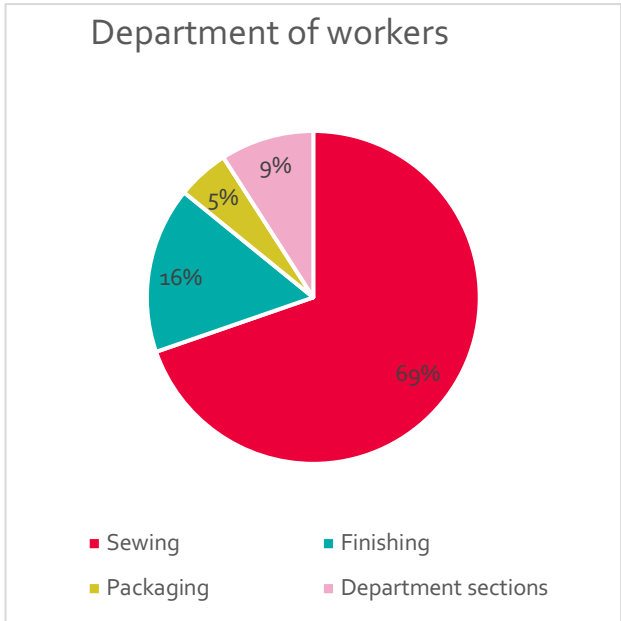
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<sup>14</sup> FGDs were conducted at a convenient place in workers' neighbourhood, and the participants were informed prior on the time and locations. A list of participants for each of these FGDs is annexed.

<sup>15</sup> Please see Annex Table 1.1 for the distribution of respondents according to gender, area, and types of workers.

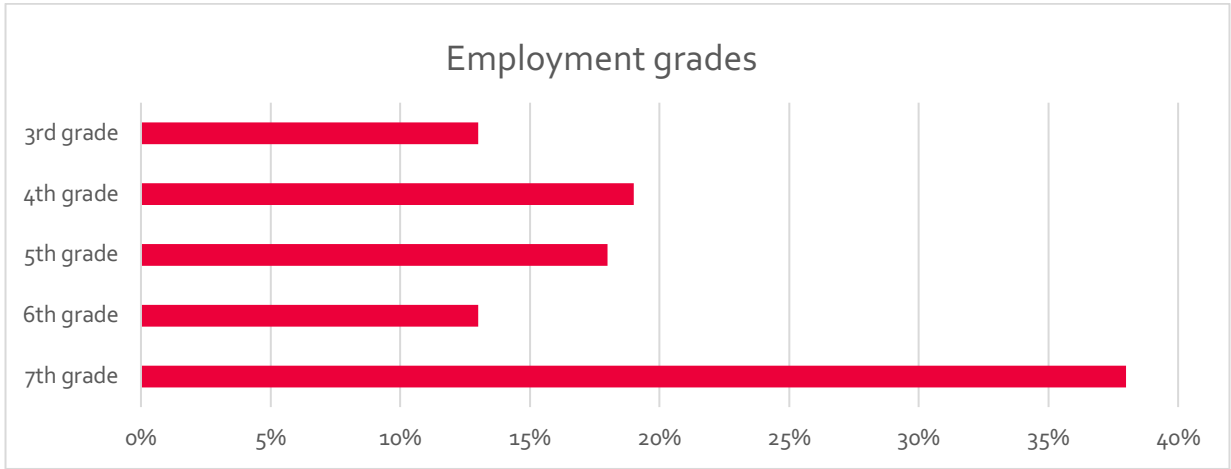


Workplace-related information (Annex Table 1.3) reveals that an equal group—representing 42% of the respondents each—are employed in either the knit or woven sub-sectors, while another 15% represent composite factories.

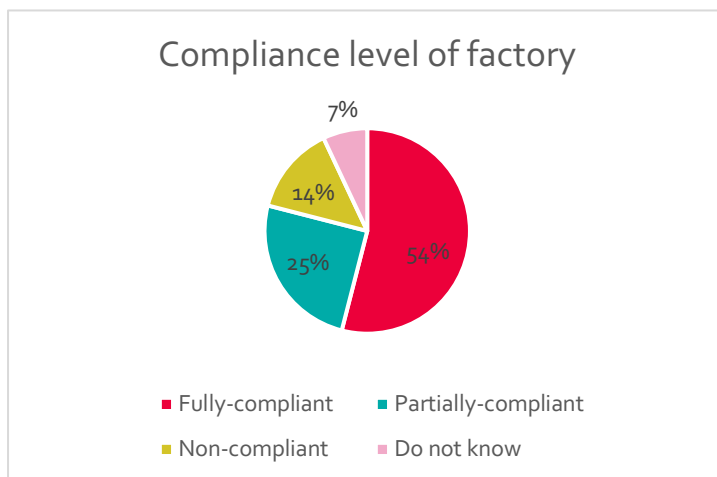


Respondents indicated the departments in which they work—sewing (69%), finishing (16%), packaging (5%), and department sections (9%).

They also indicated their employment grades—7<sup>th</sup> grade (38%); 6<sup>th</sup> grade (13%), 5<sup>th</sup> grade (18%), 4<sup>th</sup> grade (19%), and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (13%).



According to the respondents' knowledge and perception of their workplace's compliance levels, 93%



of respondents was aware or had some perception of the level of compliance of their respective factories. According to the respondents, 54% of them had the view that they work in a fully-compliant factory, 25% felt that they work in partially-compliant factor, and 14% recorded non-compliant factories.<sup>16</sup>

Most respondents' (71%) factories are either medium sized (having over 1,000 workers to 8,000 workers) or large sized (above 8,000 workers).

## STUDY OUTLINE

The study is presented in four core sections in which the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the situation of workers, with a particular emphasis on women, is described according to the four types of (in)securities:

- (i) employment (in)securities—employment contract, job termination and/or job loss;
- (ii) income (in)securities—wage and benefits;
- (iii) work (in)securities—work and working conditions; and
- (iv) representation (in)securities.

The study closes with conclusions and provides recommendations in relation to workers' insecurities, especially as they related to female garment workers, in order to better mitigate/address the impact of the Covid crisis on garment workers in Bangladesh.

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<sup>16</sup> These three categories of fully-compliant (Category-A), partially-compliant (Category-C) and non-compliant (Category-B) have been determined based on the workers' perception on the compliance level of their respective factories. No such official categories exist; nonetheless, workers knowledge on the level of compliance is drawn from the employer's claim of the compliance category of their respective factories.

# **EMPLOYMENT SECURITY**

## EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS

**Workers are predominantly permanent workers:** RMG workers are, in most cases, permanent workers. Only a few workers have been found working temporarily (Table 2.1). Knit factories employ temporary workers more so than composite factories whereas none of the respondents from woven factories were temporary workers. Important to note, temporary workers' share is more in non-compliant factories (15%) compared to the partially-compliant ones (5%). This category of worker is almost absent in fully-compliant factories (Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1: Types of employment in RMG sub-sectors**

Employment Type	Knit		Woven		Composite		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Permanent	190	90	213	100	71	92	474	95
Temporary	16	8	0	0	5	6	21	4
Contractual	3	1	0	0	1	1	4	1
Seasonal	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Table 2.2: Types of Employment in factories' level of compliance**

Employment types	A (fully-compliant)		B (partially-compliant)		C (non-compliant)		Compliance level unknown		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Permanent	268	99	117	94	60	83	29	88	474	95
Temporary	2	1	6	5	11	15	2	6	21	4
Contractual	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	6	4	1
Seasonal	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0

Source: Field Survey December 2020

### Violations in different forms exist in the areas of employment contract related provisions:

Although giving an appointment letter to the workers is a mandatory provision to be implemented by the employers, violations concerning the provision of appointment letters have been observed. The violations have multiple forms; many employers do not provide workers with the appointment letter and even if workers do receive the letter, many did not receive it before joining the factory, which is also a non-compliant practice with the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 (BLA). The present survey shows that about one-third of respondents did not receive appointment letters. The share of the workers without this entitlement is very high among temporary workers (86%) and is also very high in non-compliant factories (82%) compared to partially-compliant (44%) and fully-compliant factories (11%).

**Table 2.3: Appointment letter availability in relation to types of employment**

Availability of Appointment letter	Permanent		Temporary		Contractual		Seasonal		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	331	70	3	14	0	0	1	100	335	67
No	141	30	18	86	4	100	0	0	163	33
Do not know	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0

Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Table 2.4: Availability of appointment letter in relation to level of factory compliance**

Availability of Appointment letter	A (fully-compliant)		B (partially-compliant)		C (non-compliant)		Compliance level unknown		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	239	89	70	56	13	18	13	39	335	67
No	29	11	55	44	59	82	20	61	163	33
Do not know	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0

Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Most workers receive their appointment letter within 7 days:** Regarding the timeframe for receiving the appointment letter, 37% of respondents received it after starting the job. The time gap, however, between starting the job and getting the appointment letter varies significantly, from 7 days to 6 months (Chart 2.1). Moreover, not all workers were aware of the issues, subjects, or conditions included in the appointment letter. Among those who have received an appointment letter, this lack of awareness has been evident in one in every ten workers. Other respondents were able to report that their appointment letters specify the terms like wage amount (90%), types and number of leave days (81%), job termination (39%), and other facilities (56%).

**Non-implementation of service book related provisions is high:** Violation of service book provision is widespread in RMG factories where approximately two-thirds of the workers are deprived of this

entitlement. The study found that the overall compliance level of a factory was a determining factor, to some extent, concerning the availability of the service book; fully-compliant factories provided service book provisions at a higher rate than the partially-compliant and non-compliant factories. Non-compliance with the legal provisions was also evident for those who have been provided with the service book (Table 2.5). From

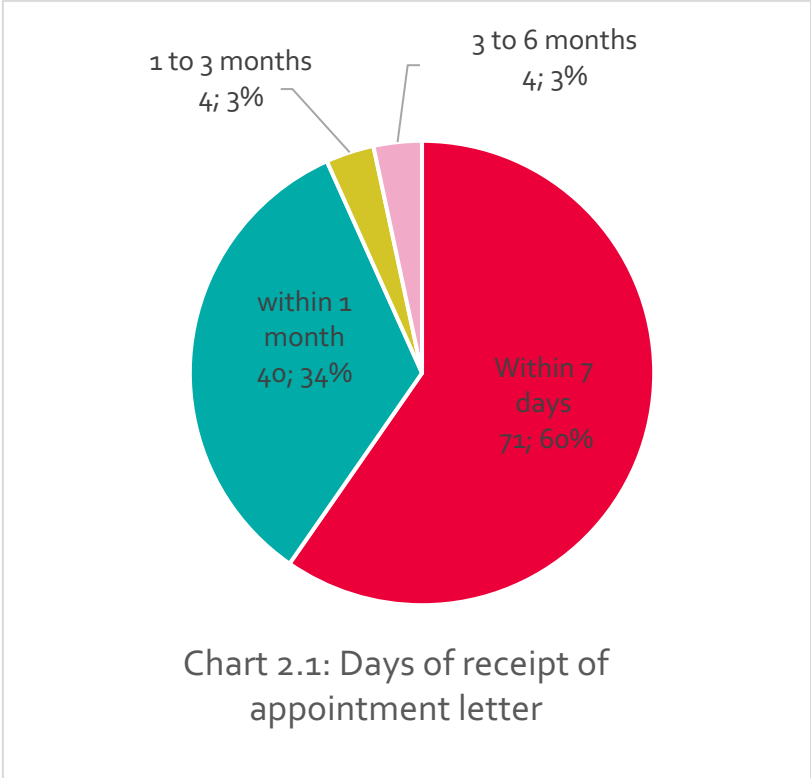


Chart 2.1: Days of receipt of appointment letter

Source: Field Survey December 2020

about half of the respondents, their employers did not take signatures in the service book, which is a legal requirement.



**Table 2.5: Availability of service book in relation to level of factory compliance**

Availability of service book	A (fully-compliant)		B (partially-compliant)		C (non-compliant)		Compliance level not known		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Yes</b>	108	40.0	6	4.8	5	6.9	5	15.2	124	24.8
<b>No</b>	128	47.4	110	88	65	90.3	22	66.7	325	65.0
<b>Do not know</b>	34	12.6	9	7.2	2	2.8	6	18.2	51	10.2

Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Most workers receive an Identity Card:** Provision of an Identity Card to workers is commonly implemented, as 93% of respondents indicated that they have received an ID card from the factory. Those who do not have the card mostly work in non-compliant factories.

**Workers' attendance is recorded digitally in most compliant factories:** Employers use different procedures to record the attendance of the workers. The majority of workers' attendance is recorded by the use of a digital punch card (56%). One in every five workers stated that their factories utilise attendance cards for keeping time records (21%), whereas 18% and 6% of workers respectively informed that their workplaces use thumbprint or face/retina scans. Please note, the modern and computerised systems are used at a higher rate in the fully-compliant factories (Table 2.6).

**Table 2.6: Attendance system in relation to level of factory compliance**

Means of attendance	A (fully-compliant)		B (partially-compliant)		C (non-compliant)		Compliance level not known		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Written on paper/card</b>	23	8.5	27	21.6	47	65.3	7	21.2	104	20.8
<b>Digital punch card</b>	182	67.4	68	54.4	11	15.3	19	57.6	280	56.0
<b>Thumb print</b>	49	18.1	19	15.2	13	18.1	7	21.2	88	17.6
<b>Face / Retina scan</b>	16	5.9	11	8.8	1	1.4	0	0.0	28	5.6

Source: Field Survey December 2020

## EMPLOYMENT SITUATION AMID COVID PANDEMIC

**Factory closure had an instantaneous impact:** In the wake of Covid, the immediate impact on RMG workers came from the closure of factories. It was the first quick-response of factories to the outbreak of the pandemic. Almost all respondents (99%) stated that their factories remained closed due to government-declared holidays<sup>17</sup> during the initial days of the Covid-19 outbreak. While factory closures ranged from 4 days to 125 days, on average, factories were closed for 40.8 days. Only 4 out of 500 respondents have claimed that their factories were not closed during the pandemic. It is important to mention that some factories in Gazipur area continued their production despite the government declared holidays/shutdown. Moreover, some factories engaged workers during the shutdown for producing personal protective equipment.<sup>18</sup>

**Manifold difficulties for those who had to travel due to shut down:** Incidences of leaving the place of residence were not common. During the factory closure, most workers did not leave their place of residence. A small proportion (8.6%) of respondents went back to their native villages when factories were declared closed. What is noteworthy, however, is that many of them had to travel several times. On average, each of them had to go there and back twice. Furthermore, those journeys were often difficult and came with considerable risk. They had to face many troubles during their travels since there was a shortage of transportation and people were crammed in buses or ferries exposing them to the risk of infection. They often had to walk a long way and even faced police harassment on the streets. Moreover, the travel came with additional financial burdens. On average, the cost to the workers for the travel between their native village and their daily residence amounted to BDT 3,685.

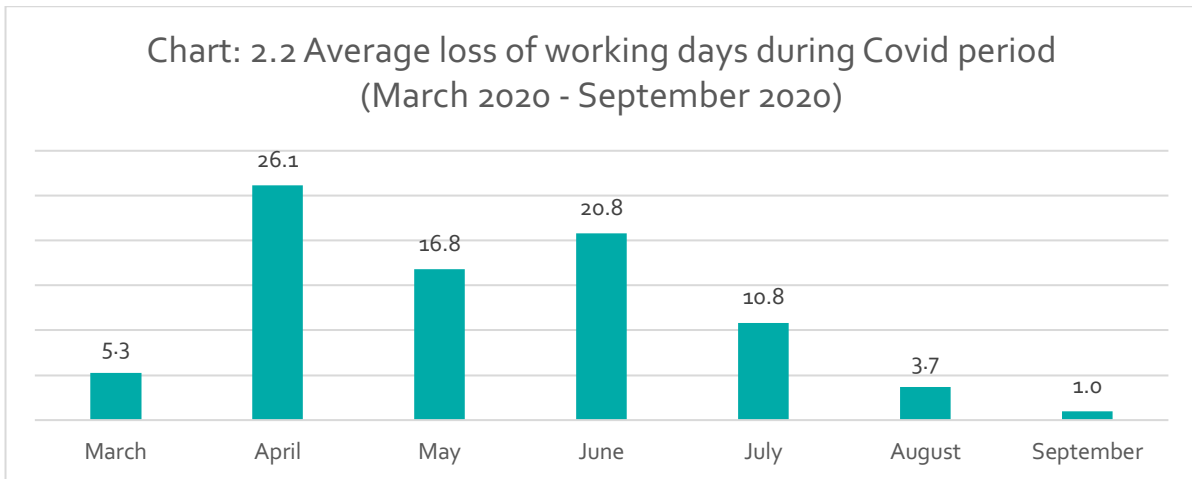
**Few workers had to change factory:** There are instances, though minimal, of workers changing factories during Covid; four per cent of workers changed employment during the pandemic. Several reasons forced them to seek a new employer, including wages still due, retrenchment, and factory closure.

**April 2020 and June 2020 sees highest losses of working days:** The Covid pandemic caused closures of factories and workers losing working days. Loss of working days was most severe in April 2020 followed by June 2020. In April 2020, workers could not work on average for 26 days, and in June, for 21 days. This gradually began to show improvement starting in July (Chart 2.2).

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<sup>17</sup> Government of Bangladesh did not use the term 'lock-down'; instead, they declared holidays that started from March 26, 2020 and gradually extended till April 25, 2020.

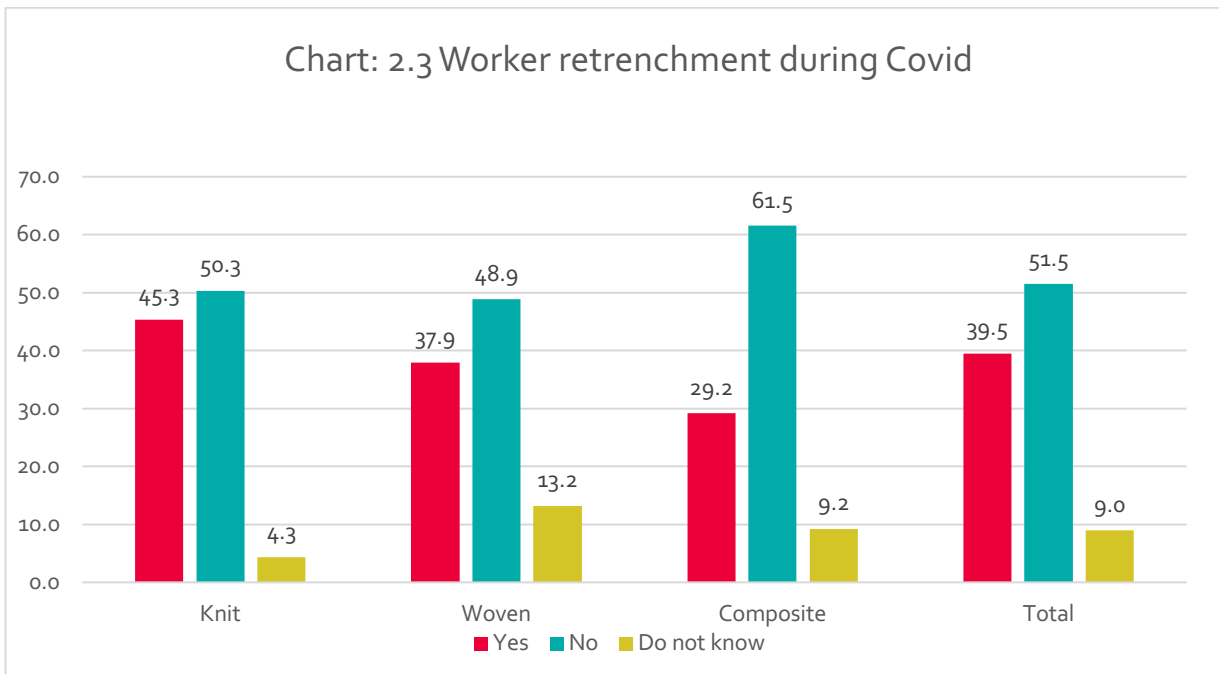
<sup>18</sup> Police Super of Gazipur raised the issue in the Discussion with the Prime Minister on April 20, 2020.



Source: Field Survey December 2020

## RETRENCHMENT OF WORKERS

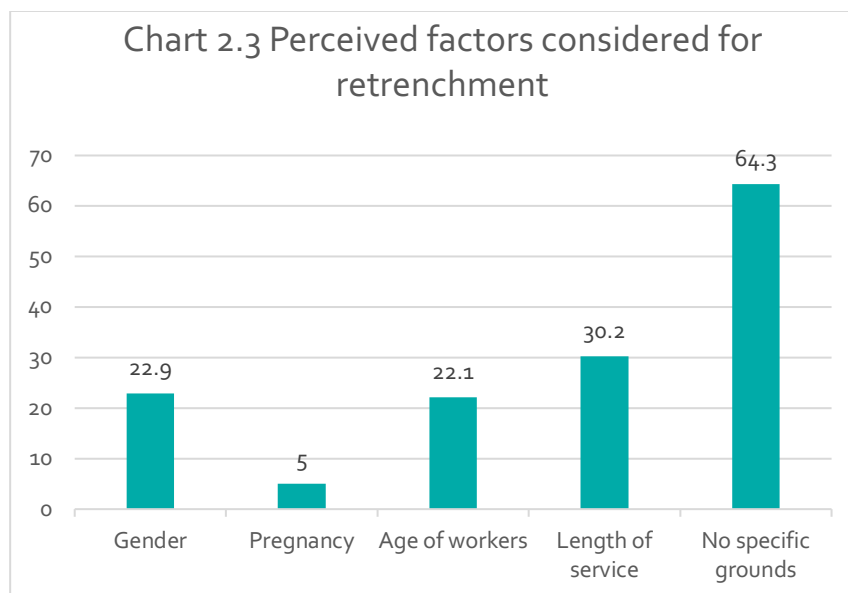
**Retrenchment incidences differed based on factory type:** Along with the factory closure, retrenchment was another immediate impact on RMG workers. Four in every ten respondents have claimed that their factories retrenched workers during the Covid period. The rate of retrenchment was slightly higher in knit factories and comparatively low in composite factories (Chart 2.3).



Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Diverse factors considered for retrenchment:** While retrenching the workers, respondents perceived that employers considered several factors including gender, the age of the workers, and the length of service (see Chart 2.4). Nineteen per cent of respondents stated that women faced more discrimination when employers retrenched workers from the factory. A few respondents (4%), however, stated the

opposite trend: male workers were retrenched more than the women. Concerning the ages of those retrenched, around 20% of the respondents claimed that over 30-years-old workers disproportionately lost their job compared to younger workers. Three in every ten respondents noted that employers considered the

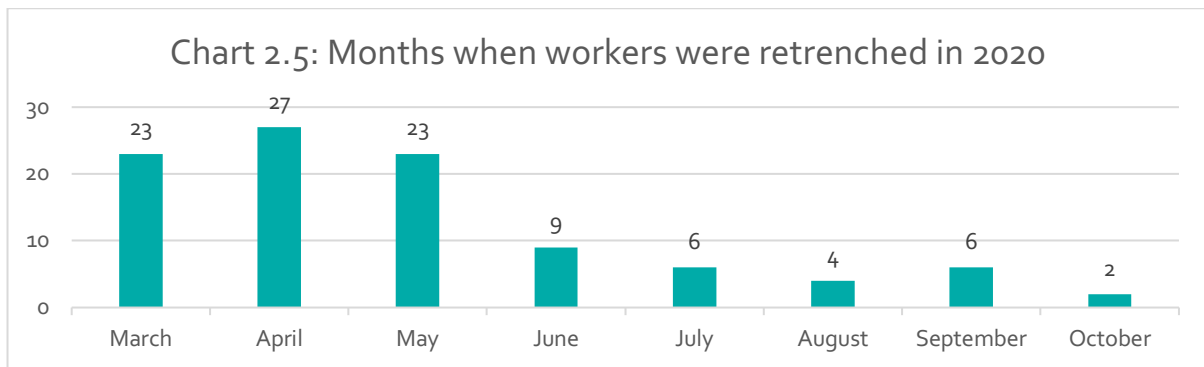


Source: Field Survey December 2020

length of service of the workers when deciding which workers to retrench from the factory. Workers having a short service-length were retrenched more often. Out of the 78 respondents who reported service-length as a deciding factor for retrenchment, 55 of them (71%) reported that employers retrenched workers whose service-length was less than 5 years at a higher rate. Since workers with short service length (below a year) are not eligible for receiving gratuity/service benefit, employers preferred to retrench them.<sup>19</sup> A few workers (around 5%) claimed that pregnant workers were also retrenched at a higher rate.

**Most retrenchments took place between March 2020 May 2020:** Job loss and retrenchment occurred more in the first three months of the Covid outbreak in the country. Data about retrenched workers show that 73% lost their jobs during that period (Chart 2.5). The severity of retrenchment reduced gradually in the following months, the lowest being in the last month for which data was recorded (October 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Key informant interviews with Chaina Rahaman, Secretary General, IBC



Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Reasons for retrenchment are diverse:** Workers have shared several reasons for their retrenchment and job loss which were mostly related (57%) to the Covid-related shipment cancellations, cancellations of work order, and closure of the factory (or a section of the factory) due to a fall in the work order. However, 7% lost their job because of being involved with the workers' movements during the Covid period.

**The retrenchment process was mostly informal:**

Most of the employers adopted informal procedures to retrench the workers. The majority of the workers averaged 1-3 years of service in the factory where they were retrenched from, while 9% of workers had been working for more than five. However, employers have not followed the formal procedure for retrenchment for most of them. They neither served a prior notice, nor had they informed the worker in writing about their retrenchment. Only 17% of respondents received written information about their retrenchment, and 16% received prior notice or information. Moreover, the notice period was even shorter than five days for more than two-thirds of those who received it.

**Not all retrenched workers received due wage:**

Most of the retrenched workers stated that they received their wage and overtime allowance. However, 14% of retrenched workers indicated that

**Box-1**

**Najma Begum neither received due wages nor retrenchment benefit**

Nazma Brgum worked in the garment sector for more than 10 years. Last she worked in Adila Apparels limited as senior operator and she served to this factory for 9 years. During Covid pandemic her factory was closed for 39 days. Her factory has opened from 5 May 2020 and she also joined in the work. But the 2<sup>nd</sup> June when she went for work the supervisor orally informed her that she had been retrenched. Supervisor said, " Now the factory is passing bad time, you know that there is no new order in this time. So we have no option other than retrenchment of workers. Now you can go. We will call you latter to provide your due wages and benefits". After that I went several times to the factory for my du wages and retrenchment benefit, but they neither gave my wages for the month of May nor any other benefit," Claimed Najma begum. Now she is running her life by preparing paper bag. Najma said, " Now I earn 3500 to 4000 Taka per month, where when I worked in the factory, earned monthly 11000 taka on an average."

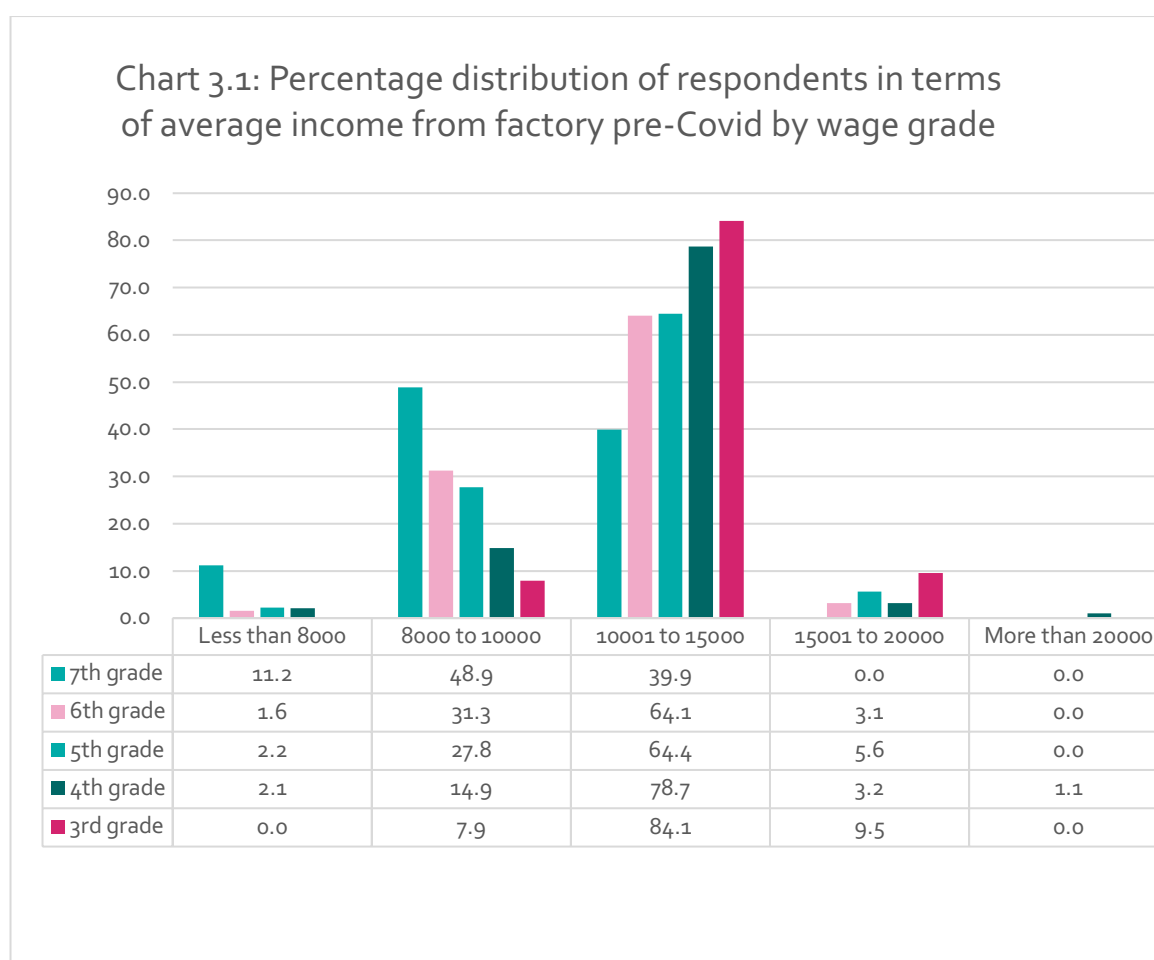
they did not receive their due wage/overtime allowance after being retrenched. **The case of Nazma Begum is evidence in this regard (Box-1).** When they did, the majority (57%) had to wait for more than 15 days to receive the dues. Some workers (8.1%) even had to wait more than 60 days to get the dues.

**Examples of providing service benefit to the retrenched workers are few:** Furthermore, instances of retrenched workers getting their entitled service benefit were rare. Only 6% of retrenched workers received such benefits. Of those that did, none of them received 100% of their due benefits.

# INCOME SECURITY

## WORKERS' MONTHLY INCOME

**Prior to the pandemic, most workers in the garment industry earned wages according to their grade structure:** Garment workers' wages are determined according to the seven-grade wage structure declared by the 'Minimum Wage Board'.<sup>20</sup> The seventh grade is the wage for entry-level workers containing the minimum wage for the sector, which is currently set at BDT 8,000. The survey included workers who fall in the three to seven grade categories. The distribution of workers' monthly income before the pandemic by grade shows that almost all the workers (95%) received the minimum wage according to their grade structure. About five percent of workers earned less than BDT 8,000 and among them the workers from seventh grade are around 11% (Table 3.1 and Chart 3.1).



Source: Field Survey December 2020

<sup>20</sup> The *Minimum Wage Board* is a Bangladesh government regulatory agency under the *Ministry of Labour and Employment* responsible for recommending changes to the minimum wage, which varies by industry, to the government.

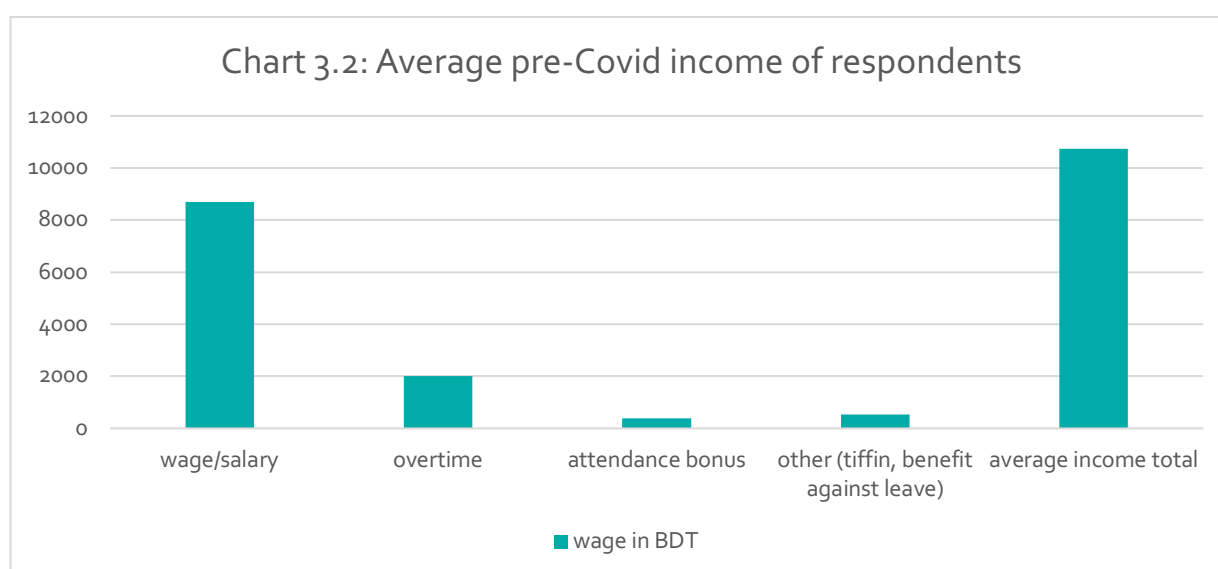


**Table 3.1: Monthly income of respondents from factory before Covid by wage grade**

Monthly income (BDT)	7th grade (BDT 8,000)		6th grade (BDT 8,420)		5th grade (BDT 8,875)		4th grade (BDT 9,347)		3 <sup>rd</sup> grade (BDT 9,845)		Others (could not mention)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Less than 8,000	21	11.2	1	1.6	2	2.2	2	2.1	0	0.0	0	0	26	5.2
8,000 to 10,000	92	48.9	20	31.3	25	27.8	14	14.9	4	6.3	1	100	156	31.2
10,000 to 15,000	75	39.9	41	64.1	58	64.4	74	78.7	53	84.1	0	0	301	60.2
15,000 to 20,000	0	0.0	2	3.1	5	5.6	3	3.2	6	9.5	0	0	16	3.2
More than 20,000	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.1	0	0.0	0	0	1	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey December 2020

The study found that, before the pandemic, the highest number of respondents' monthly income (60%) ranged from BDT 10,000 to 15,000 followed by (31%) in the range of BDT 8,000 to 10,000 (Table 3.1). On average, workers received BDT 10,747 as a monthly wage including overtime, attendance bonuses and other allowances e.g., allowance for tiffin,<sup>21</sup> and lunch. The average income from overtime is BDT 2,004 (Chart 3.2). Gender distribution of workers' income shows that the average monthly income of male workers is slightly higher (around 2%) than that of female workers and the wage gap between men and women is BDT 162 (Table-3.2). The secondary graphic reveals that a gender wage differential exists within the garment sector.<sup>22</sup>



Source: Field Survey December 2020

<sup>21</sup> Tiffin refers to a light tea-time meal

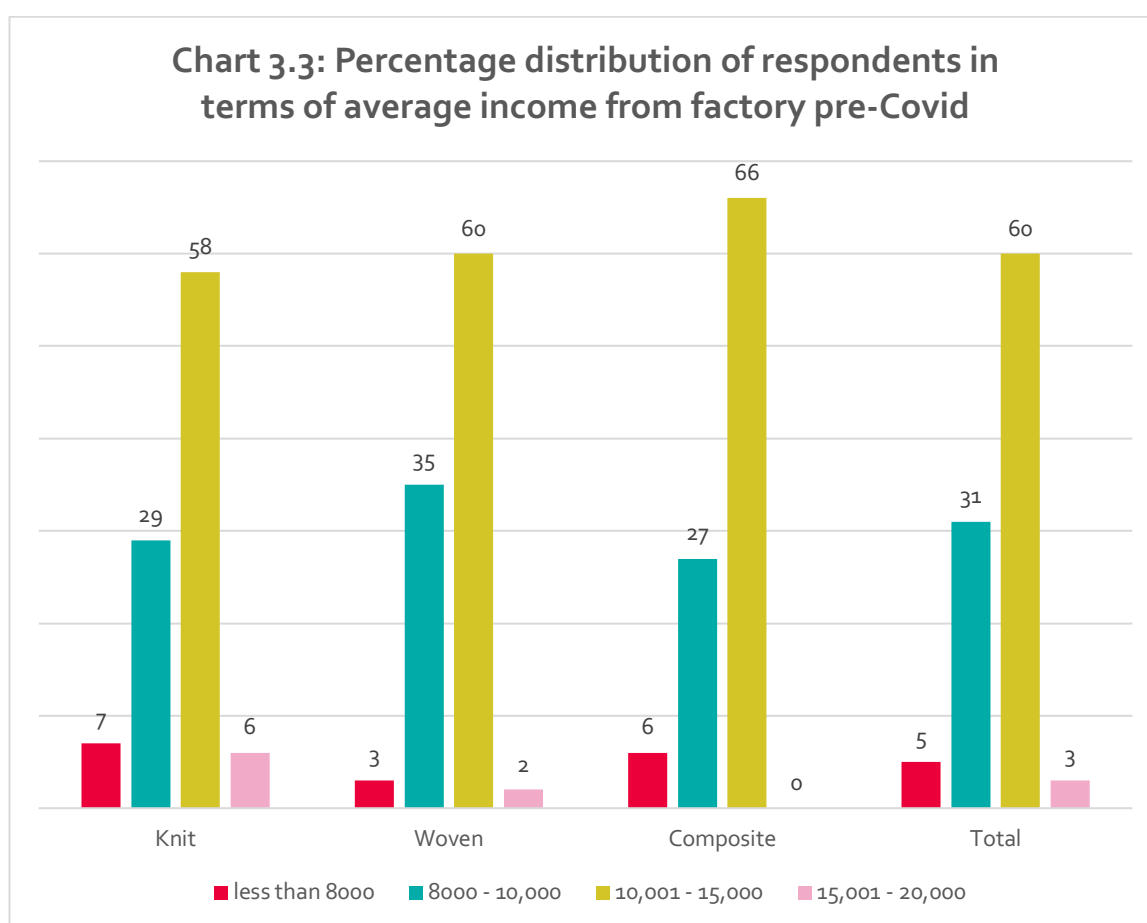
<sup>22</sup> ILO, (2019), *Improving Working Conditions in the Ready-made Garment Sector- Baseline Study*, Dhaka.

**Table- 3.2 Mean wage of workers before pandemic**

Mean wage of workers (BDT)	Mean wage of female workers (BDT)	Mean wage of male workers (BDT)	Wage gap
10,747	10,682	10,844	162

Source: Field Survey December 2020

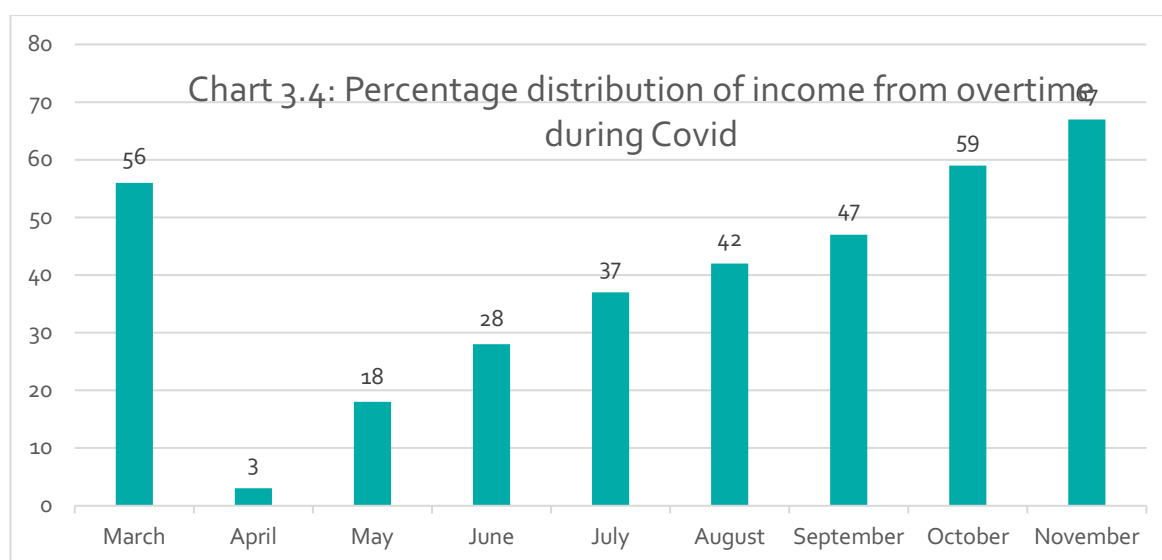
Breaking down the data by type of factory reveals that there is no major difference regarding monthly wages of workers in knitwear, woven and composite factories. However, among the workers who are being paid less than BDT 8,000, most of whom belong to knitwear and composite factories (Chart 3.3).



Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Garment workers’ monthly income decreased during the pandemic:** This study found that the average monthly income (including overtime) of garment workers decreased during the Covid pandemic. This is compared to the average workers’ income (including overtime) prior to the pandemic (BDT 10,313). The average income dropped to its lowest level in the month of April (BDT 5,425). The survey data further reveals that the average income gradually started to increase from May and had

almost returned to the pre-Covid levels in October. Workers' income from overtime had also reduced during the pandemic, particularly during April and May. About only 3% of respondents reported that they had income from overtime in March and only 18% in April. The situation steadily improved from May (Chart 3.4), whereas 79% of workers confirmed that they received income from overtime prior to the pandemic. The majority of the participants in a FGD claimed that they have performed overtime but did not receive full payment for overtime during the Covid period.<sup>23</sup>



Source: Field Survey December 2020

Throughout the pandemic period, the gender wage gap remained (Table 3.3 and Chart 3.5). Workers in a FGD also reflected on this issue, reporting that that discrimination in wages based on gender persisted during the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 3.3: Workers' average income and gender wage gap during the pandemic**

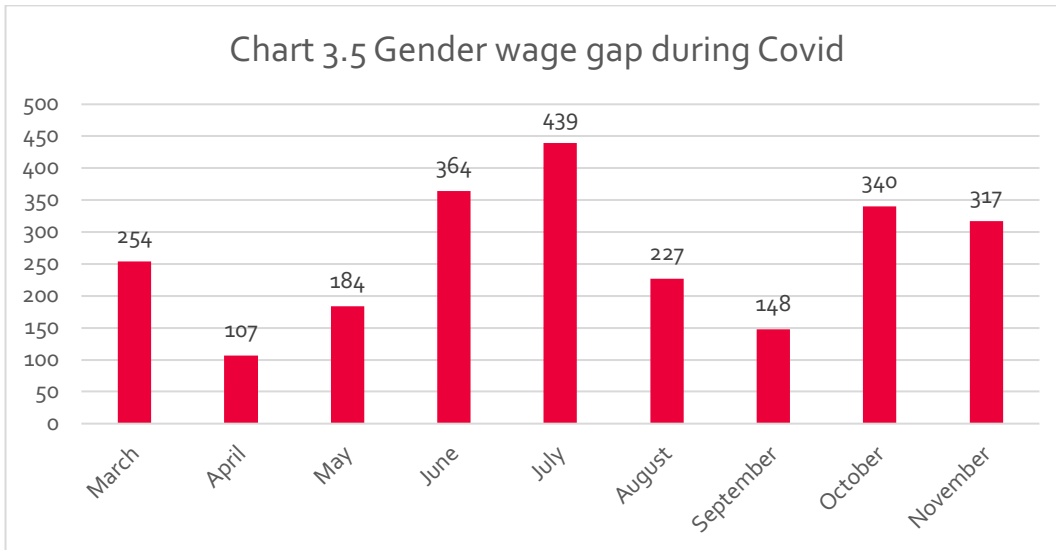
Month	Mean wage of workers (BDT)	Mean wage of female workers (BDT)	Mean wage of male workers (BDT)
March	9,816	9,715	9,968.99
April	5,422	5,380	5,487
May	7,599	7,528	7,712
June	8,775	8,633	8,997
July	9,358	9,187	9,626
August	9,484	9,394	9,621

<sup>23</sup> FGD with current garment workers, Mirpur 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

September	9,729	9,671	9,818
October	10,010	9,875	10,216
November	9,986	9,858	10,174

Source: Field Survey December 2020



Source: Field Survey December 2020

### Current monthly income of retrenched workers

**Most of the retrenched garment workers yet to have a regular income:**

Of the workers who have been retrenched due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, most are still jobless and are struggling to survive. The case of Mahmud is evidence to that (Box- 2). According to survey findings, only 39% of retrenched workers are currently involved in income earning activities. Male workers engaged in rickshaw pulling, vegetable selling, labouring and street vending, among other things, while female workers engaged in tailoring, and as domestic workers, among other things. The average monthly income of such workers dropped to BDT 5,056, less than half of the average income of workers pre-

pandemic (Chart 3.6). 'It is difficult to survive with this limited income', said one retrenched worker in FGD.<sup>25</sup>

### **Box- 2 Mahmud and his family are struggling to survive**

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the identity of Mahmud. Few months ago he was an operator of a garment factory, now he is unemployed. Mahmud worked in garment sector for 4 years. Last 2 years and 6 months he worked in the AMCS textile as operator when he earned around BDT 10000 per month. His wife worked in the same factory too as operator. Mahmud can run smoothly his four members family (he has two children) with their income. From the month of May 2020 he is unemployed. His wife also lost her job at the same time. Though currently his wife is working in a sub contract factory, where she earns BDT 4000 to 5000 per month, but he could not find any job for him. Now they are struggling to survive with the limited income of his wife. Mahmud said, "It is difficult to run my family with my wife's limited income as we have to pay house rent Taka 2500 per month. Therefore, we have to reduced the cost of food and children's education to survive, but we do not know how many days we able to survive in this way." He also shared that if he fails to engage himself in any income earning activities within one or two month, they have to return village and there is also waiting a struggling life for them.

Many retrenched workers perceive that due to irregular income and lack of formal sector job their social status has also been downgraded (FGD, Mirpur). The case of Jobeda is an example here (Box 3).

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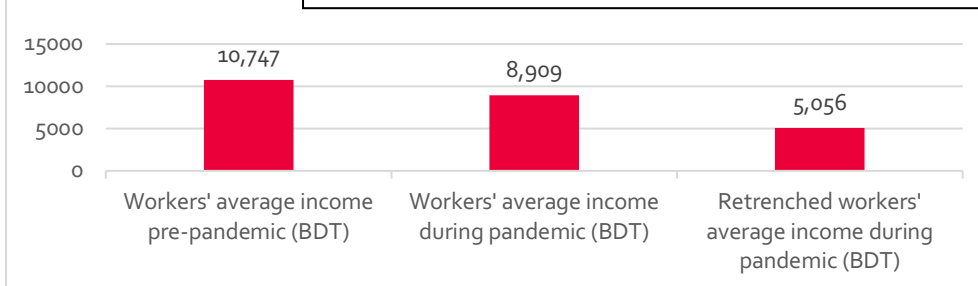
<sup>25</sup> FGD with retrenched workers, Chottogram

### Box-3 Retrenched workers enjoying lower social status

Jobeda, 40-years old, has been a mobile tea-seller after losing her job from the garment factory. She worked six years in a factory located in Mirpur in Dhaka. After losing the job, she could not manage a new job in any other garment factory. Jobeda said, "I tried to get a job in other factories. But getting a job in the garment has become harder due to the Covid-19. Moreover, I am older now. No factories want to employ women of older age." Finding no other way of income, Jobeda started to sell tea. She sells tea in the morning, afternoon and evening. In the morning, she starts selling around 6.am and continues till 9 am, often 10 am. In the afternoon she begins selling at 4-5 pm and continues till 9-10 pm. After selling tea all day, she earns about 5000-6000 BDT monthly. Whereas her income from the garment was around BDT 12000-13000 monthly, including overtime.

Her income has now significantly reduced. But more importantly, her social status has also been downgraded. From a garment worker, she is now an informal sector street hawker. "When I worked in the garments, I had status. That was a job which all respected. But now I have no job; I am a mobile tea-seller. My status and social position have degraded greatly."

Chart 3.6: D  
befo



Source: Field Survey December 2020

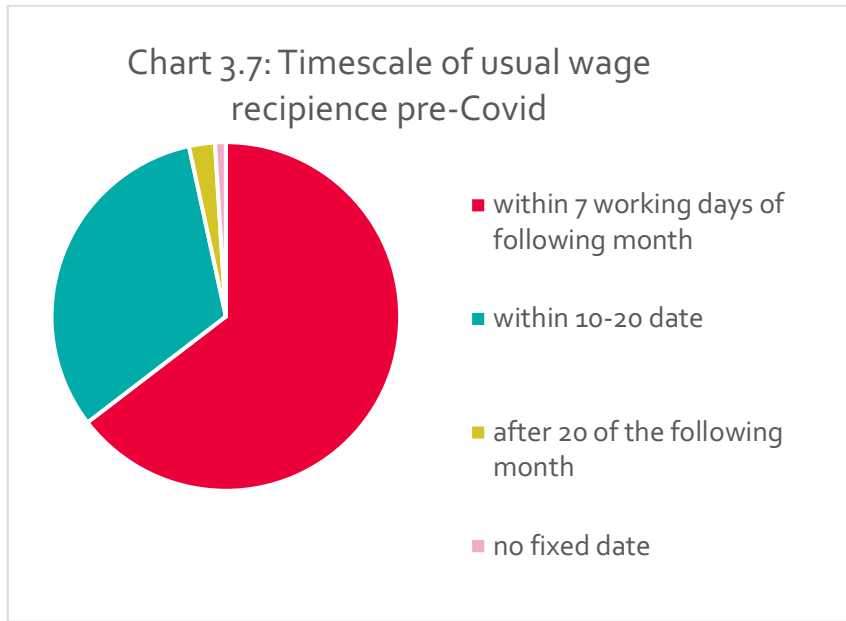
## WAGE PAYMENT TIMESCALE

### Varied practice on the timescale for payment of wages:

Information relating to the time period for wage payment reveals that, in the garment sector, the practice of delaying salary/wage was not so widespread prior to the Covid period. About 65% of workers received their wages according to the legal provision - within seven working days. This varied based upon the level of compliance of the factories. About 78% of the fully-compliant factories provided the wages within 7 working days of the following month, whereas 58% of the partially-compliant and 29% of the non-compliant factories provided the wages within 7 working days (Chart

3.7).

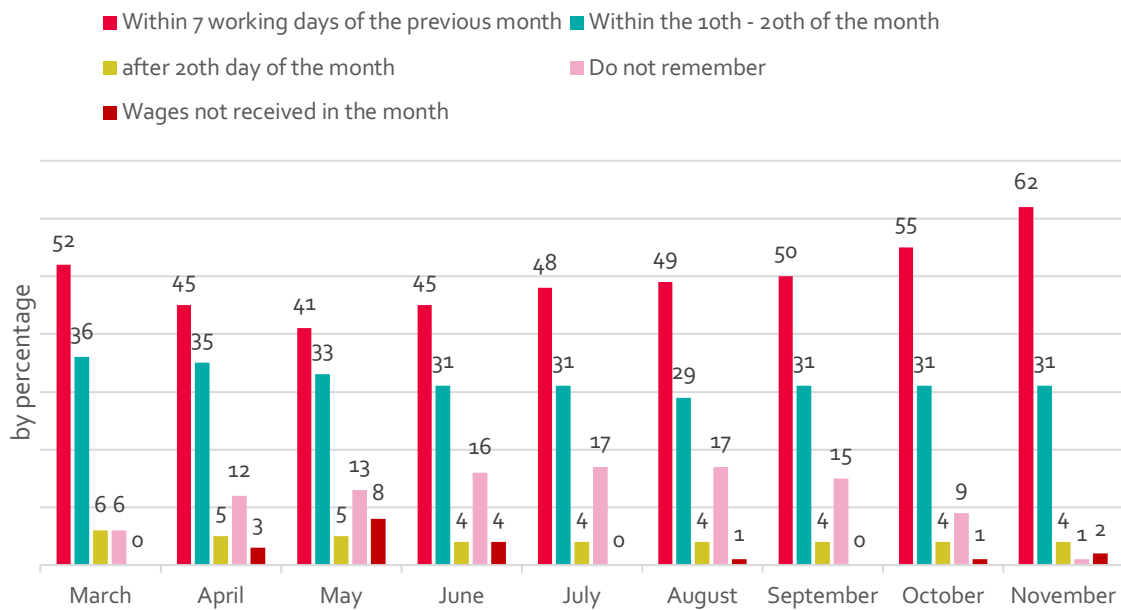
A slightly different practice has been observed during the Covid period. Regarding the specific date of wage payment, a violation of the legal provision was observed in many cases particularly at the initial stage of the Covid period. The survey data depicts that, from the month of April 2020 to September 2020, only about 40% to 50% of workers had received their wage payment within seven working days of the following month. However,



Source: Field Survey December 2020

ignorance or disinterest regarding date of wage payment was observed among a significant number of workers who said that they could not remember the specific date of wage payment (Chart 3.8).

**Chart 3.8: Distribution of the timescale of usual wage recipience during Covid**



Source: Field Survey December 2020

## BONUS PAYMENTS

**Festival bonus is the most common wage-related benefit received by RMG workers:** Workers reported that they received two festival bonuses equal to their basic salary every year prior to the pandemic. In order to qualify for the bonus, workers need to have been working for the factory for at least six months. Evidence from the survey shows that around three-quarters of survey respondents received both Eid bonuses.

Furthermore, there was declaration by the Bangladesh government that garment workers would receive festival bonus in two instalments: 50% before Eid and another 50% after Eid. The survey findings showed that almost all the workers (99%) did indeed receive the Eid bonus by this payment plan, one instalment before and one after as declared by the government (table 3.4).



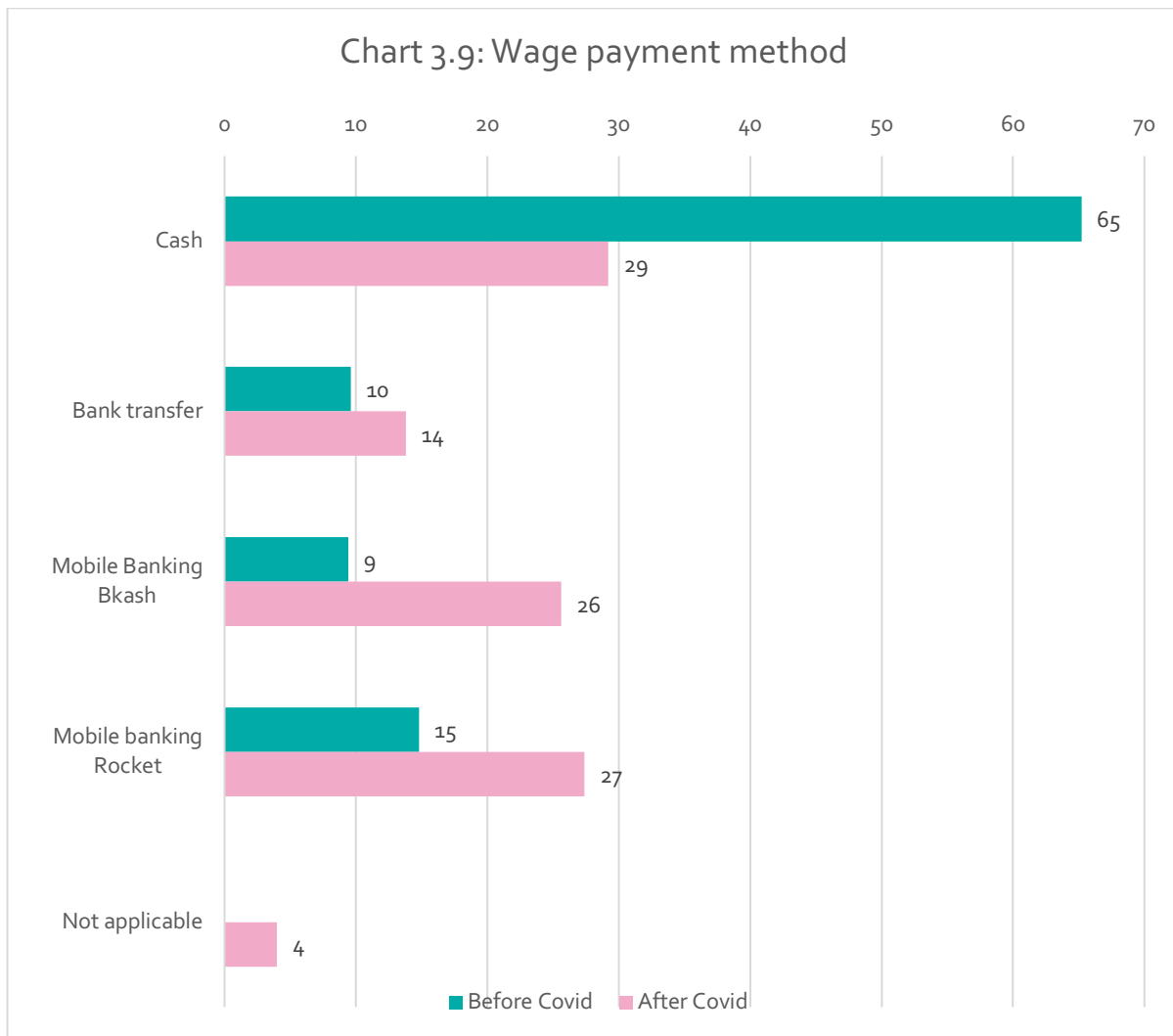
**Table 3.4: Timeframe of Eid bonus payment**

Payment of bonus	Eid -ul-Fitre						Eid-ul-Azha					
	Current workers		Retrenched workers		Total		Current workers		Retrenched workers		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Before &amp; After Eid</b>	355	99	27	96	382	99	354	99	17	100	371	99
<b>Before Eid</b>	5	2	1	4	6	2	3	1	0	0	3	1
<b>After Eid</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	360	100	28	100	388	100	358	100	17	100	375	100

Source: Field Survey December 2020

## **WAGE PAYMENT METHOD**

**Wage payment method has radically changed during the Covid pandemic:** Before the pandemic, most garment workers (65%) received their wage and bonuses in cash, but this situation completely changed during the Covid period. Now only 29% of the workers received their wages in cash, while the remaining workers received their payments through their Rocket account (27%), Bkash account (26%) or through their bank (14%) (Chart 3.9).



Source: Field Survey December 2020

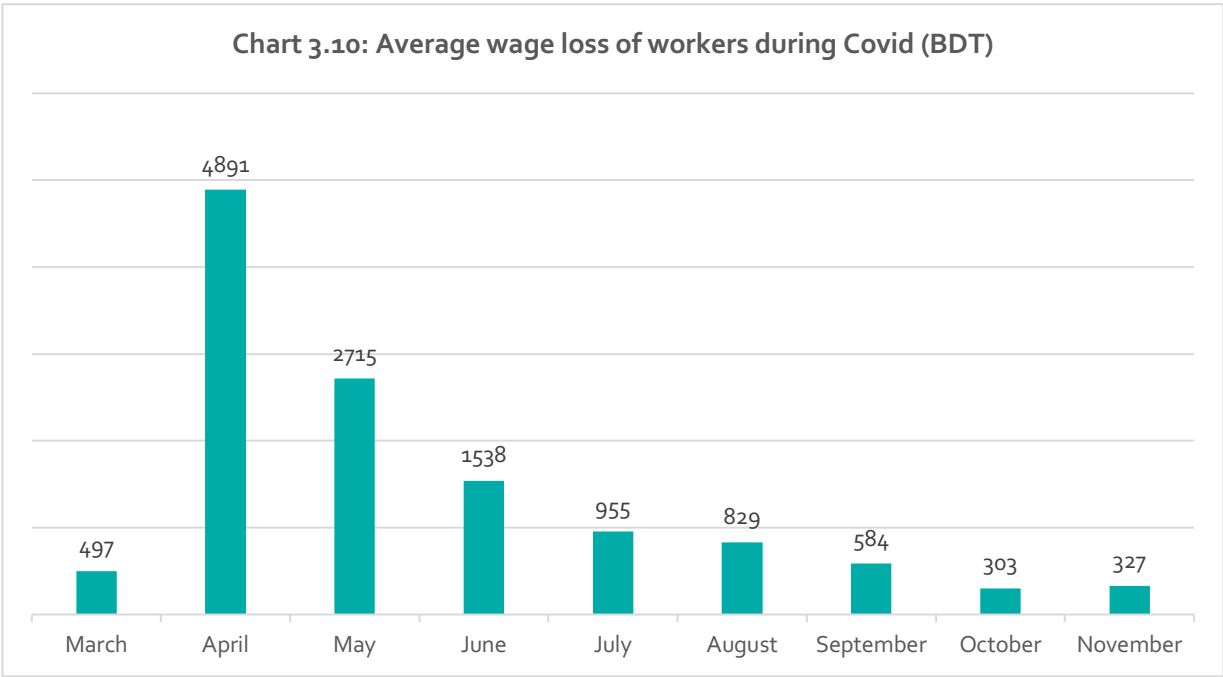
About 28% of workers reported that they had opened a Bkash/Rocket account during the pandemic, while a significant number of workers did not utilise either service (around one-third). About 27% the respondents reported that they had an account before the pandemic. Some respondents further reported that they had faced payment issues e.g., government ID card-related problem (8%), could not open account on time (7%), or it became too late to receive wages (4%).

## **WORKERS' INCOME LOSS AND COPING STRATEGIES**

**Covid pandemic lead to major loss of income for the RMG workers, in particular, for retrenched RMG workers:** The government declaration—stating that the workers of garment factories that were

closed during public holidays would receive 65% of their gross monthly wages for the month of April— led to income loss for a large number of workers. According to survey findings, the highest drop in income is observed in April, followed by May. Though workers' average income gradually increased from the month of June, a wage loss was still apparent up to November 2020 (Chart 3.10). This income loss put the thousands of workers and their families at risk.<sup>26</sup> One of the garment workers said in FGD,

'I have not earned anything because of the lockdown, and I do not have any savings. In that time, I felt that we would die due to lack of food, not due to the Coronavirus'.<sup>27</sup>

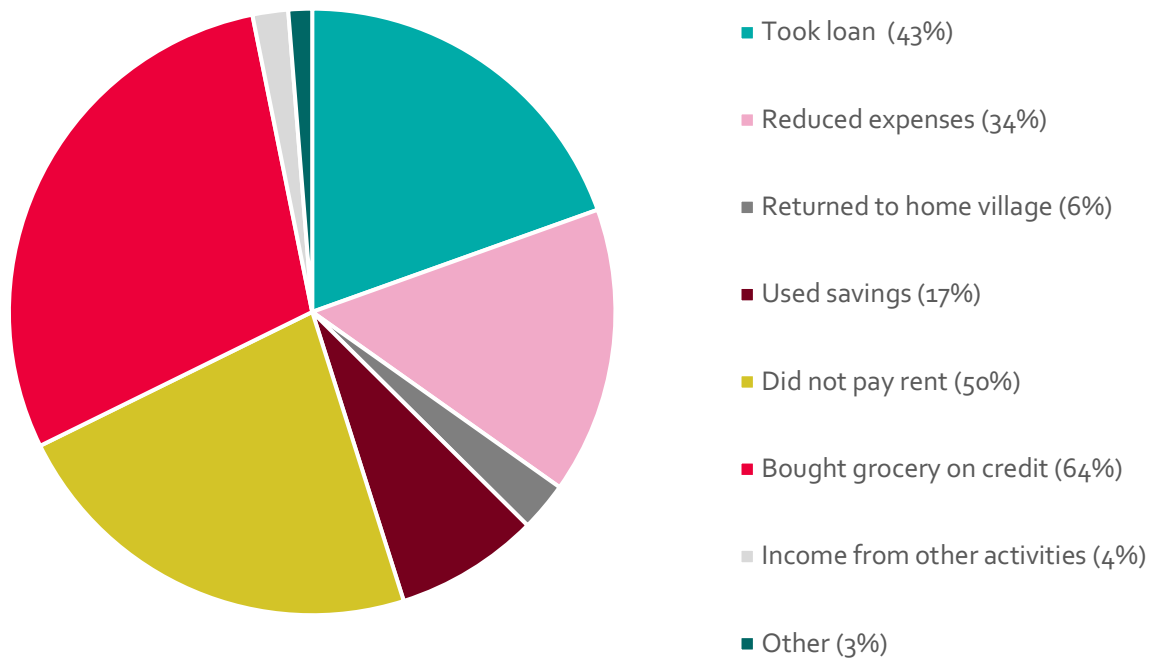


Source: Field Survey December 2020

<sup>26</sup> Key Informant Interviews with Razekuzzaman Ratan, General Secretary, Sramik Front

<sup>27</sup> FGD with current garment workers, Tongi.

Chart 3.11: Strategies adopted by respondents to overcome the situation during Covid



Source: Field Survey December 2020

In order to cope with the income loss, both current and retrenched workers have taken various measures. These included taking out loans, reducing expenditure, using savings, delaying house rental payments, and buying groceries on credit (Chart 3.11). In an FGD, one retrenched worker told us she is making and selling paper baskets to help feed her family.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> FGD with retrenched garment workers, Chottogram.

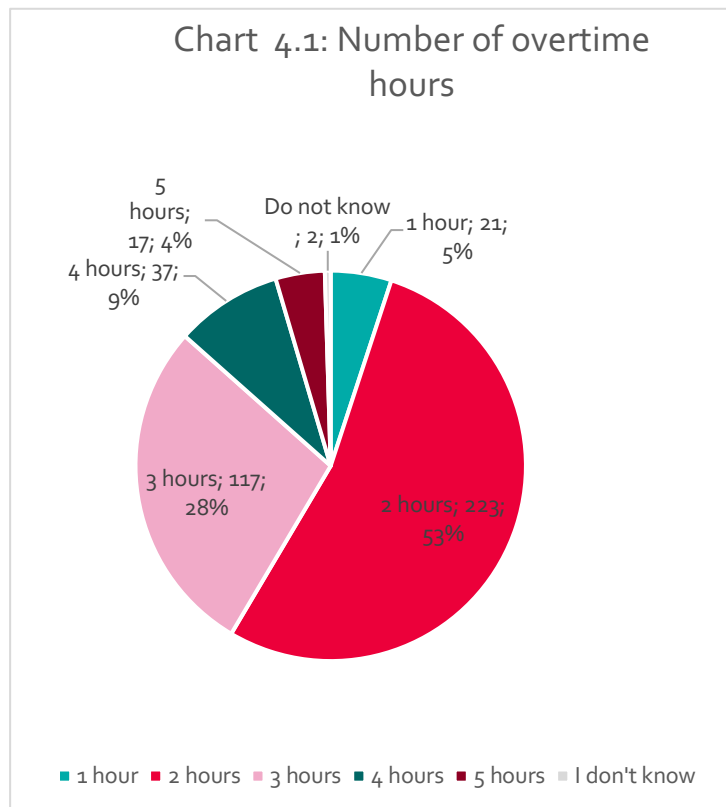
# WORK SECURITY

## DAILY WORKING HOURS, REST AND LEAVE

**Similar pattern in regular working hours in all categories of factories:** Not including overtime hours, almost all RMG workers (99%) work at least eight hours per workday. This number is similar irrespective of the nature of the factory, e.g., knit, woven, and composite and there is no difference based upon the compliance level of the factory.

**Overtime hours vary according to the compliance category as well as among present and retrenched workers:** Overtime is a common practise for the workers of the RMG industry, where 83% of the respondents regularly conducted overtime work. Similar numbers were observed when comparing respondents from different types of factories and when comparing current workers against retrenched workers it is shown that 81% of current and 94% of the retrenched workers were used to regularly undertaking overtime work. Due to the Covid pandemic, at the time of publishing, incidence of overtime was lower among the current workers as many factories experienced order cancellation from buyers resulting in a reduced workload in the factory.<sup>29</sup>

The BLA 2006 permits two hours of overtime each day;<sup>30</sup> however, violation of this provision is commonplace. More than 41% of workers conducted overtime work that exceeded the legal limit. This situation is not comparative when considering the type of factory.



Source: Field Survey December 2020

<sup>29</sup> Orders worth USD 3.17 billion were cancelled or suspended during the early days of the Covid outbreak in Bangladesh. [UNICEF (2020), *Covid-19: Impact on Ready-made Garment Workers in Bangladesh*.]

<sup>30</sup> No adult worker shall ordinarily be required or allowed to work in an establishment for more than eight hours in any day. No adult worker shall ordinarily be required or allowed to work in an establishment for more than forty-eight hours in any week. Provided that the total hours of work of an adult worker shall not exceed sixty hours in any week and on the average fifty-six hours per week in any year. [BLA 2006, Section 100 & 102]

Excessive overtime occurs more frequently in knit factories, where 62% of workers undertake overtime more than the legal limit, compared to 28% in composite and 24% in woven factories (Chart 4.1).

The difference between current and retrenched workers is very pronounced. Incidences of more than two hours overtime work are lower among the current workers (35.9%) when compared to retrenched workers (58.8%). Covid-related order cancellations, drop of orders etc. have been the main contributing factors in this regard—there is less work available in general. Little difference has been observed concerning the category of the factory where more than two hours overtime occurs slightly more in partially-compliant factories (44.7%) when compared to fully-compliant factories (41.7%) and non-compliant factories (36.8%).

**Insufficient rest time during work characterises RMG work:** Excluding lunch breaks, rest periods are rare in the RMG sector.<sup>31</sup> Approximately nine in every ten current workers (89%) are not allowed to take a rest break, except during lunchtime. The proportion of respondents claiming this (97%) is higher among the retrenched workers. It is particularly interesting to note that the possibility for taking a rest break is higher in non-compliant factories (20.8%) compared to fully compliant factories (7%) and partially compliant factories (6.4%). Working hours, including overtime, in the non-compliant factories are generally longer which may explain why there is more opportunity for rest for the workers.<sup>32</sup>

Out of the 400 current workers, only 42 reported the availability of a rest period (other than lunch) among whom 24 respondents indicated that they enjoy one rest period daily, while the remaining 18 respondents enjoy two rest periods per day. On the other hand, only three retrenched workers out of 100, reported the availability of a one-time daily rest period. Both current and retrenched workers indicated that the rest period was usually short; 22 respondents of the 400 reported 5-10 minutes' rest, while 21 respondents reported they undertook 10-15 minutes breaks.

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<sup>31</sup> Any worker in any establishment shall not be liable to work either: (a) for more than six hours in any day unless he has been allowed an interval of at least one hour during that day for rest or meal; (b) for more than five hours in any one day unless he has been allowed an interval of at least half an hour during that day for rest or meal; or (c) for more than eight hours unless he has had an interval under clause (a) or two such intervals under clause (b) during that day for rest or meal. [BLA 2006, Section 101]

<sup>32</sup> Key informant interview with Saleha Islam Santona, President, Mother Land Garment Sramik Federation

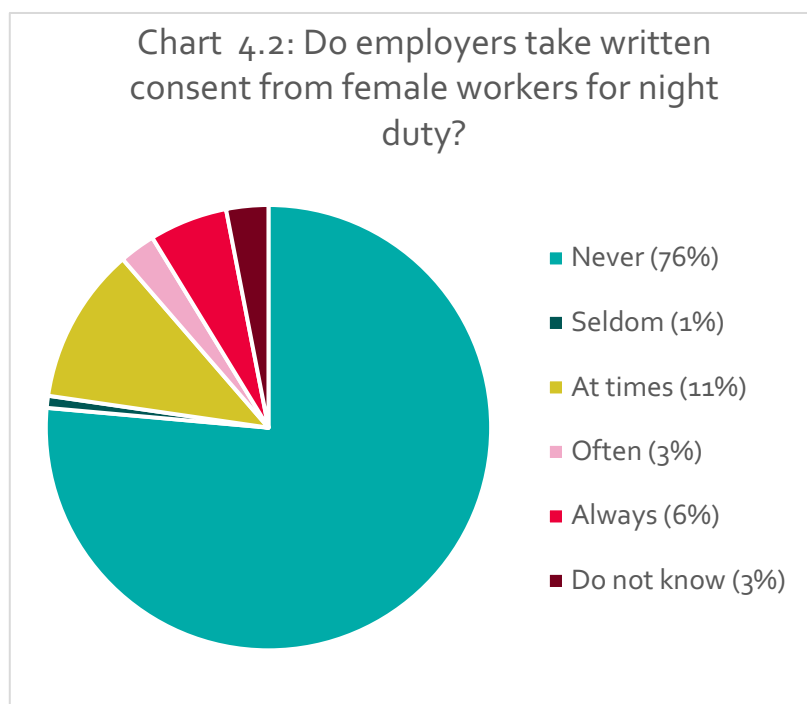
## NIGHT DUTY

**No consent taken from women who conduct night duty:** Forty-six per cent of respondents reported that women work in the factory past 22:00. The difference in responses between the current and retrenched workers is also noteworthy as 42% of current workers and 61% of retrenched workers have reported the night duty of women. Ninety per cent of the respondents indicated that women’s work after 22.00 was mainly observed or required during pick-time and urgent shipment. Nine per cent stated that, a proportion of female workers performed work after 22.00 throughout the year (9. , Both the current and retrenched workers have expressed similar opinions on when female workers are required to do night duty,

The BLA 2006 prohibits female workers from working the period between 22.00 to 06.00 without their written consent;<sup>33</sup> however, this provision is not always adhered to.

In most cases, the legal requirement of taking written consent was not followed. More than three-quarters of the respondents

informed that consent is never taken from the female workers. Both current and retrenched workers provided similar information. Only 13 of the 229 respondents (6%) who reported about night duty for women, all of whom are current workers, claimed that employers always take written consent from female workers before engaging them in work after 22.00.



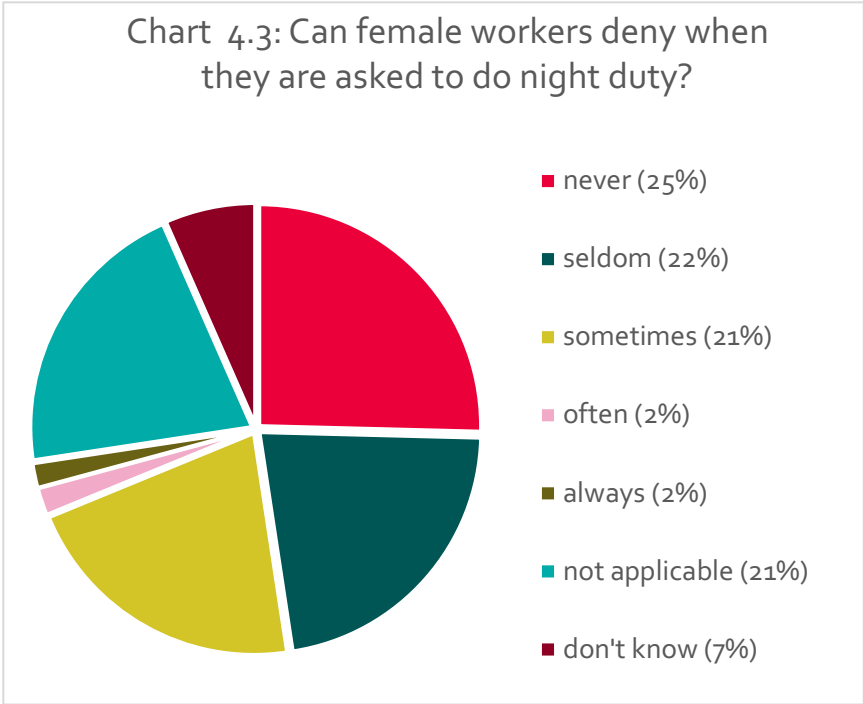
Source: Field Survey December 2020

<sup>33</sup> No women shall, without her consent, be allowed to work in an establishment between the hours of 22.00 and 06.00 (BLA 2006, Section 109)



The level of compliance of factories as perceived by the workers does not make any difference with regards to the practice of taking written consent from the female workers. Evidence from the worker survey shows that the violation occurs more in the fully-compliant factories compared to the partially-compliant and the non-compliant factories. Eighty-one per cent of the respondents from fully-compliant, 70% from partially-compliant, and 75% from non-compliant factories claimed that their employers never take the written consent.

The study also found that the right to refuse night duty was often also restricted or outright denied in most cases. Only 1.8% of all respondents (2% of the current workers, and none from the retrenched) claimed that workers are 'always' free to say no when night duty



Source: Field Survey December 2020

is scheduled (Chart 4.3). Surprisingly, however, the possibility for refusal is slightly more in non-compliant factories (4%) than the partially-compliant (2%) and fully-compliant (1%) factories. The data regarding all factories, irrespective of the compliance levels, are found to be similar. In contrast, 28% of the current workers and 15% of the retrenched workers indicated that they 'never' can say no to night duty. The condition, in this regard, is similar in knit, woven, and composite factories. Furthermore, 20% of current workers and more than 33% of the retrenched workers stated that female workers seldom get the chance to refuse night duty.

## **COVID IMPACT ON WORKING HOURS, OVERTIME, REST, AND NIGHT DUTY**

**A mixed impact on the working hours, rest, and night duty:** The Covid pandemic has directly influenced the working hours, overtime hours, rest breaks, and night duty of RMG workers. This impact, however, varies regarding the types of workers concerned.

For current workers, overtime hours is the area most affected: 38.3% of these respondents claimed that daily overtime hours have been reduced, at an average decrease of 2.6 hours per day. This can be calculated that the average missing overtime for each worker is 39.63 hours per month. For the average overtime days per month, 32.5% have indicated that they experienced a reduction. They reported that now have the chance for overtime work for only ten days every month, compared to 26 days every month pre-Covid.

In contrast, a small portion of current workers reported an increase in daily overtime hours and days by 5% and 4% respectively. These workers stated that they work an additional three hours of overtime along with 2.47 hours of the daily average. They work these additional hours for about four days, on average, every month. The frequency of night duty has decreased for some workers (16%), while there is non-statistical relevant increase in night duty reported by respondents.

The daily regular working hours (8 hours per day) and rest periods are the least affected by Covid; 99% and 95% of the respondents, respectively, stated that the conditions have remained the same as the pre-Covid periods.

## **COVID IMPACT ON LEAVE PRACTICES**

**Covid has impact on the leave practices of workers:** Pre-Covid, workers were frequently deprived of supplementary leave, casual leave, and sick leave.<sup>34</sup> About two-thirds of the respondents, in each case, claimed that employers do not always provide workers with supplementary leave and casual leave. A similar claim has been made by the more than half (53%) of the respondents regarding sick leave. In reference to annual leave, although six in every ten respondents stated that this leave was provided

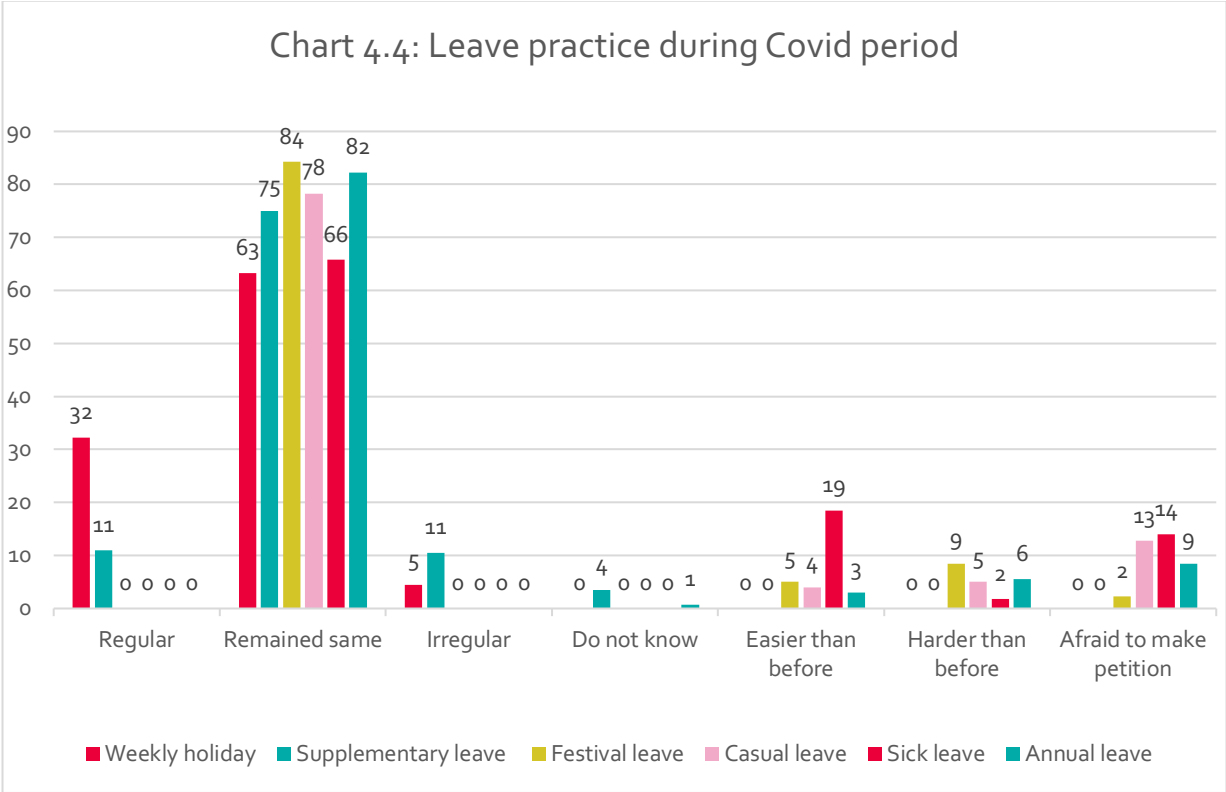
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<sup>34</sup> A worker is entitled to take a weekly holiday, compensatory weekly holiday, 10 days of casual leave every year, 14 days of sick leave, annual leave (one day for every eighteen days of work), and 11 days of festival leave. [BLA 2006, Section 103, 104, 115, 116, 117 & 118]

always, FGD participants informed that most factories provided money instead of leave (FGD Dhaka, and FGD Narayanganj).

During the Covid period, the practice concerning the provision of leave remained unchanged, according to the opinion of most workers. Some remarkable changes, however, have been reported in relation to sick leave and casual leave. According to 19% of the respondents, approval for sick leave is easier to obtain now. There can be several reasons for this: with the risk of a sick worker bringing Covid-19 into a factory, management may be more lenient with sick leave to try to ensure that infected workers do not come into the factory and, since the workload in many factories has decreased, there is less of a need to have all workers present. Both may be contributing factors as to why employers of some factories now allow workers to take sick leave.

Conversely, 14% of respondents claimed that workers are now afraid of asking for sick leave. Regarding casual and annual leave, 13% and 9% of respondents respectively were reluctant to request leave of these types (Chart 4.4). The possibility of job loss was the main reason behind this increased fear (FGD Dhaka, and FGD Chottogram).



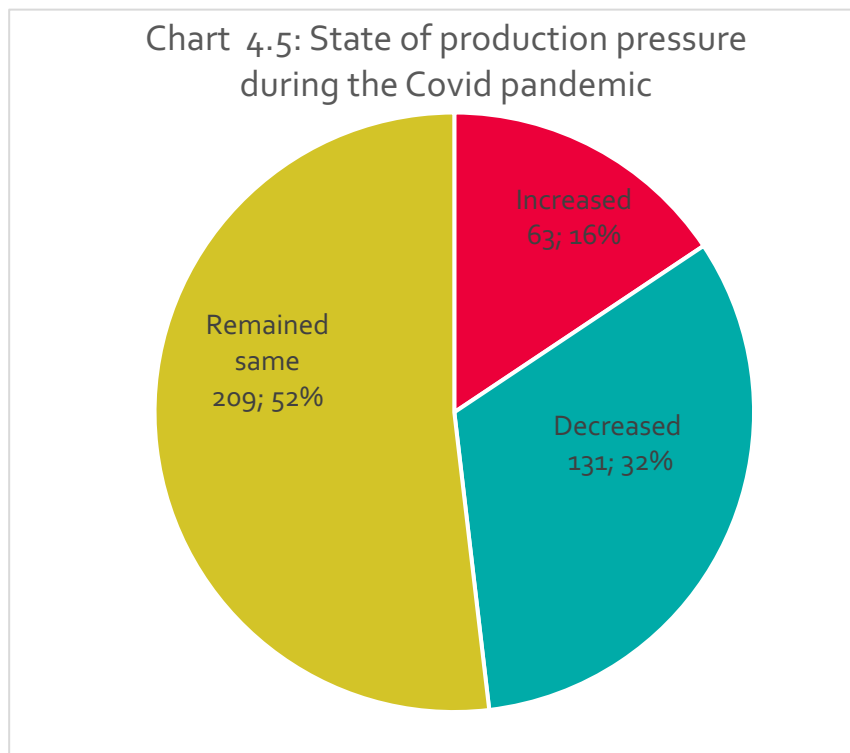
Source: Field Survey December 2020

## PRODUCTION PRESSURE DURING COVID

**Mixed opinion observed regarding production pressure during Covid:** The impact of Covid on production pressure at the factory has been remarkable. Although the majority (52%) of current workers have claimed that the pressure has remained unchanged, about one-third (32%) of respondents reported a

decrease in production pressure. The decrease has been reported more by the respondents from knit factories (43%) compared to the composite (32%) and woven factories (24%). In

contrast, there are also instances of an increase in workload during the Covid, 16% of respondents stated about the increase (Chart 4.5). An increased workload has been



Source: Field Survey December 2020

reported by the respondents of composite factories (31%). Furthermore, the decrease has been reported more by the respondents who work in fully-compliant factories (37%), whereas the increase in production pressure was reported by respondents from non-compliant factories (21%).

**No change in employment contract despite the changes in workload:** many workers have reported a change in the workload during the covid period. the change has directly affected the working hours, rest, and overtime for many workers, as well as modifying the leave practices in many factories. however, most employers (93%) have not altered employment contracts. there is also a lack of awareness among a few workers: 7% of respondents informed that they do not know whether any alteration has been made by the employers in their employment contract.

## MATERNITY LEAVE

### Majority of factories provide maternity leave, though not entirely following the legal provision:

Maternity leave,<sup>35</sup> as defined by the BLA 2006, is not provided in all factories. Even when provided, the applicable legal provisions are not always followed completely: 83% of respondents informed that female workers at their respective factories received maternity leave (Table 4.1). However, 56% of 417 respondents who claimed maternity leave's availability stated that four-months leave, as per the legal requirement, was provided. Besides, 3% and 37% of them stated that their factories provided maternity leave for two months and three months, respectively. The length of the leave is not specific in the opinion of 4% of the respondents (of 417). Therefore, it can be calculated that the legal provision regarding the length of maternity leave is not followed in the workplaces of 44% of the respondents.

Availability of maternity leave is similar in knit and woven factories, 84% of the respondents from both knit and woven factories have reported the availability of maternity leave. The proportion of respondents claiming the same from composite factories is slightly lower (77%). On the other hand, significant variation has been observed in relation to the provision of maternity based on the level of compliance of factories. Fully compliant factories provide maternity leave at a higher level (91%) than the partially compliant (83%) and non-compliant (63%) factories. Therefore, the level of compliance makes a big difference with regards to the practice or availability of maternity leave (Table 4.1).

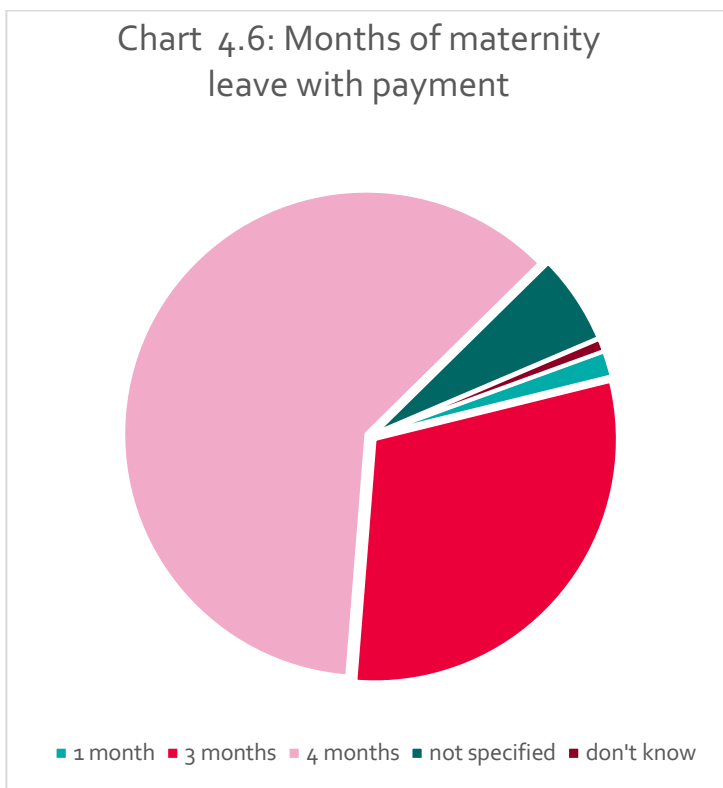
**Table 4.1: Maternity leave availability**

	A (fully-compliant)		B (partially-compliant)		C (non-compliant)		Compliance level unknown		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Yes</b>	246	91	104	83	45	63	22	67	417	83
<b>No</b>	14	5	9	7	24	33	7	21	54	11
<b>Do not know</b>	10	4	12	10	3	4	4	12	29	6

Source: Field Survey December 2020

<sup>35</sup> No employer shall knowingly employ a woman in his establishment during the eight weeks immediately following the day of her delivery; every woman employed in an establishment shall be entitled to, and her employer shall be liable for, the payment of maternity benefit in respect of the period of eight weeks preceding the expected day of her delivery and eight weeks immediately following the day of her delivery. [BLA 2006, Section 45& 46]

Maternity leave is not always a paid leave; 89% of 417 respondents shared that employers provided paid maternity leave. However, wages were not always provided for four months. A total 61% of the respondents who claimed availability of maternity leave in their factories got 4 months of leave with pay. The remaining 39% of the respondents are either unaware or claimed that their factories provide paid leave below the legal limit (see Chart 4.6). 88%, 88% and 92% of respondents from the knit, woven, and composite factories respectively have reported the availability of paid maternity leave (Table 4.2). Hence, the type of factory does not make a big difference in this regard. However, the compliance categories do show some variations. The availability of paid leave has been reported at a higher rate by the respondents from fully-compliant factories (94%) than the partially-compliant (81%) and non-compliant (73%) ones (Table 4.3).



Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Table 4.2: Does wage accompany maternity leave in accordance with factory types?**

	Knit		Woven		Composite		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Yes</b>	157	88	158	88	54	92	369	88
<b>No</b>	15	8	12	7	1	2	28	7
<b>Do not know</b>	6	3	10	6	4	7	20	5

Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Table 4.3: Wage accompanying maternity leave in relation to level of factory compliance**

	A (fully-complaint)		B (partially-complaint)		C (non-complaint)		Compliance level unknown		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Yes</b>	231	94	84	81	33	73	21	95	369	88
<b>No</b>	8	3	15	14	5	11	0	0	28	7
<b>Do not know</b>	7	3	5	5	7	16	1	5	20	5

Source: Field Survey December 2020

Covid has brought no remarkable changes regarding the provision of maternity leave, while many workers are unaware of the issue.<sup>36</sup> Survey data show that three in every four respondents have noticed no change in maternity leave practice, and 23% of the respondents are unaware of a change. Only 7 of 417 respondents observed the change in this regard. During the FGDs, many participants have claimed that wage payment for maternity leave has been irregular in their factories. Some others have further noticed that no wage is being paid for maternity leave, and even that women face difficulties to re-join the workforce after the leave period was completed. (FGD in Dhaka and Narayanganj)

## HEALTH CARE PROVISIONS

**Healthcare services are available in varying degrees across the factories:** Respondents stated that various healthcare provisions and services,<sup>37</sup> such as first aid stations, medicine dispensaries, health clinics, ambulances, and female doctors, are available in varying degrees in their factories. Among the services, first-aid stations and dispensaries are the most commonly available<sup>38</sup> and ambulances are the least available service. In addition, 58% and 77% of respondents, from current workers and retrenched workers respectively, informed that their employers have made a health clinic and/or have a female doctor available for the workers.

<sup>36</sup> Key informant interview with Tawhidur Rahaman, Former Secretary General, IBC

<sup>37</sup> There shall, in every establishment, be provided and maintained, so as to be readily accessible during all working hours, first-aid boxes or cupboards equipped with the contents prescribed by rules; in every establishment wherein three hundred or more workers are ordinarily employed, there shall be provided and maintained a sick room with dispensary; If minimum 5000 workers and employees work in the establishment the owner shall establish a Health Centre [BLA 2006, Section 89]

<sup>38</sup> Key informant interview with Md. Lutful Matin, Director Admin and Complacence, Natural Denim Ltd.

These health services have been continuing in most of the factories during the Covid period and significant changes have not been reported by the respondents. Only 11 respondents out of 400 current workers (3%) reported suspension of services during the Covid period.

**Special attention given to women workers during their menstruation is not commonplace:** Workers who menstruate generally do not get any special treatment to accommodate their menstruation. The study, however, also found a general lack of awareness among the workers. Six out of ten respondents indicated that there is no special provision or treatment, 12% do not know whether any facility was provided, while 28% of the respondents shared knowledge of the existence of some sort of provision for menstruating workers. The most commonly mentioned measures include the provision of leave (57%) and reduction of the workload (57%). Many workers also observed factory authorities providing medicine, in the form of pain killers, to the menstruating workers. Other measures, which are comparatively less frequent, include early work breaks (21%) and providing more suitable seating, such as closer to the toilets and positions that allow for a stool or chair.

Company subsidisation of female sanitary products remains a rare practice; only 7% of respondents noticed the availability of such a service at their workplace, whilst 10% of respondents were unaware of any such provisions.

**Sexual and reproductive health and rights of workers is a neglected area:** Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is a term used to describe various issues related to sexual health, sexual rights, reproductive health and reproductive rights that affect both women and men, although predominantly women. It is noteworthy that very few factories provide workers with relevant SRHR information.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, workers are generally unaware of their SRHR. Seven in every ten respondents noted that such information is not available. One-fifth of the respondents do not know whether any information is provided by the factory authority. Yet, even among the respondents who have claimed the availability of SRHR information in the workplace, 8.4% of them lack awareness of the details. Many could not mention what type of information was provided by the factory management and only a few workers knew about family planning-related information.

With regard to pregnancy, the majority of workers (60%) said that female workers received some special attention or treatment during their pregnancy.<sup>40</sup> The measures taken to accommodate pregnant workers include extra rest periods (62%), time to walk and stretch their legs (56%), health

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<sup>39</sup> Health Centre of a factory must have the arrangement for providing data, training and consultation regarding family welfare and reproduction health [BLR 78]

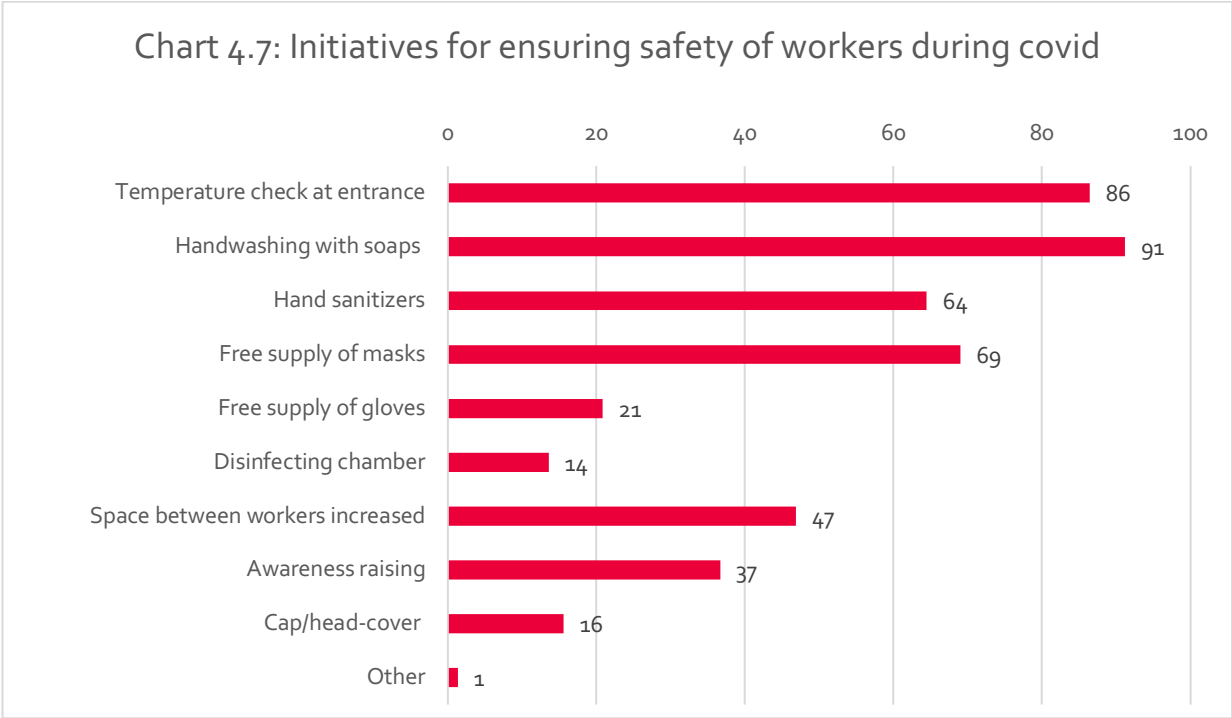
<sup>40</sup> Health Centre of a factory must have the arrangement for providing service and consultation to the pregnant workers before and after childbirth. [BLR 78]



check-ups (38%) and finding a suitable seating arrangement that is more comfortable for pregnant workers (26%). On the other hand, 28% of respondents have mentioned the absence of any such measures at their workplace. FGD participants overwhelmingly claim that many of the facilities are arranged by the co-workers, and not by the factory authorities.

### HEALTH PROTECTION MEASURES DURING COVID

**A gradual decrease in measures for health protection during Covid:** Most of the factories had taken different special measures to protect the health of the workers in the initial months during the Covid period. It must be mentioned, however, that these initiatives have gradually reduced (FGD Dhaka). A total of 89% of respondents have noticed special measures taken within the factory, while one in ten respondents were unaware about any workplace measures.



Source: Field Survey December 2020

The most common initiatives reported by most respondents were arrangements for the checking of body temperature and the availability of soaps for handwashing. The supply of masks and availability of hand sanitisers have been reported by around two-thirds of the respondents. Physical distancing among the workers (while at work) was implemented in the workplaces of 47% of the respondents, while 37% of the respondents mentioned that awareness-raising information was provided at their

workplaces. Less common measures, reported by 20% or less of the respondents, included the supply of gloves, disinfecting chamber installation, and the supply of head covers/caps (Chart 4.7).

## **WELFARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION MEASURES**

### **Availability of welfare and social protection measure insufficient during Covid:**

The impact of the Covid pandemic has been evident in the different areas of welfare and social protection facilities.<sup>41</sup> According to the BLA 2006, workers are entitled to several facilities including day-care, a breastfeeding corner, canteen, gratuity, provident fund, and accident injury compensation, among others. The provision of such services and facilities in the pre-Covid period was not satisfactory in most cases. Not a single factory interviewed had all of these required facilities available. The situation was comparatively worse for gratuity and provident funds: only 27% and 18% of respondents' employers, respectively, made those facilities available for workers (Chart 4.8).

The Covid pandemic has made the conditions worse. A reduction/declining trend has been observed for all the services. Though the reducing trend is minimal for most services, the trend is somewhat remarkable for day-care and breastfeeding corners.

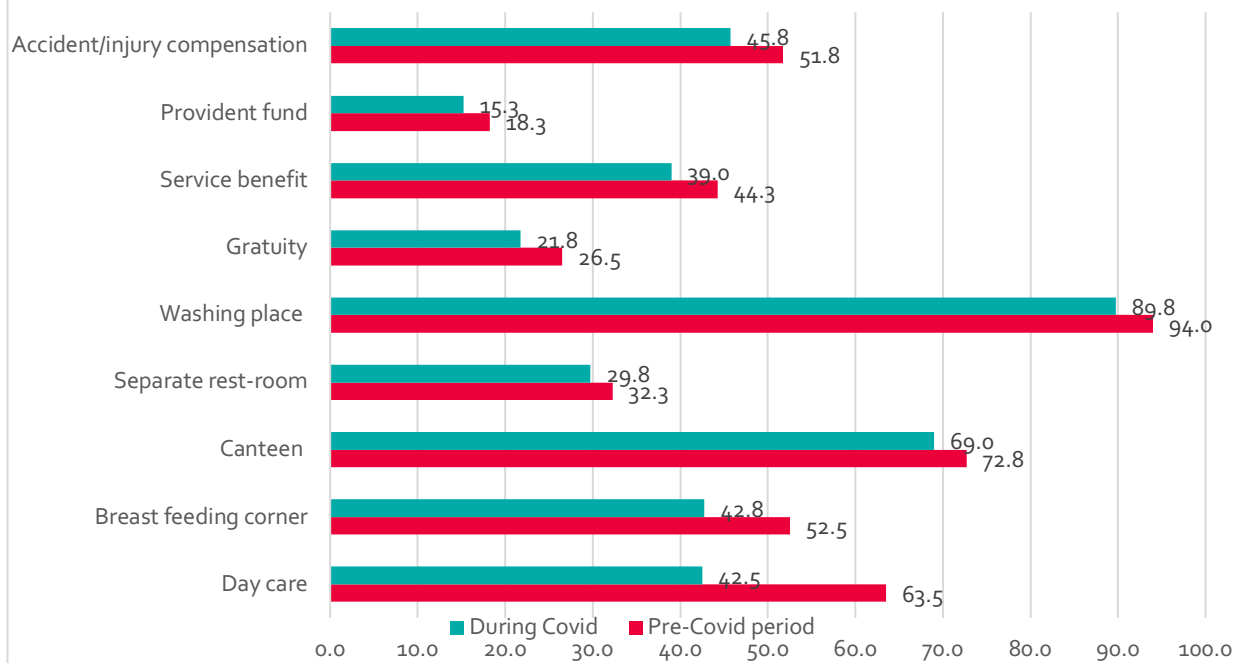
### **New facilities during Covid**

Generally, employers have not introduced any new facilities for the workers during the Covid period, with the exception of health protection measures including hand-washing facilities at the entrance of the factory (along with the existing ones inside factory building), and the availability of drinking water.

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<sup>41</sup> In every establishment adequate and suitable facilities for washing and bathing shall be provided and maintained for the use of the workers therein; separate and adequately screened facilities shall be provided for the use of male and female workers; In every establishment wherein more than one hundred workers are ordinarily employed, there shall be provided adequate number of canteens for the use of the workers; In every establishment, wherein forty or more workers are ordinarily employed, there shall be provided and maintained a suitable room or rooms for the use of children under the age of six years of such women; In the establishments wherein more than 25 female workers are employed, separate rest rooms are to be maintained and in establishments wherein less than 25 female workers are employed, separate and adequate spaces with screen shall be provided; If personal injury is caused to a worker by accident arising out of and in the course of his employment, his employer shall be liable to pay compensation; An establishment in the private sector may constitute for the benefits of its worker a provident fund. [BLA 2006, Section 91-94, 150& 264]

Chart 4.8: Availability of welfare and social protection measures

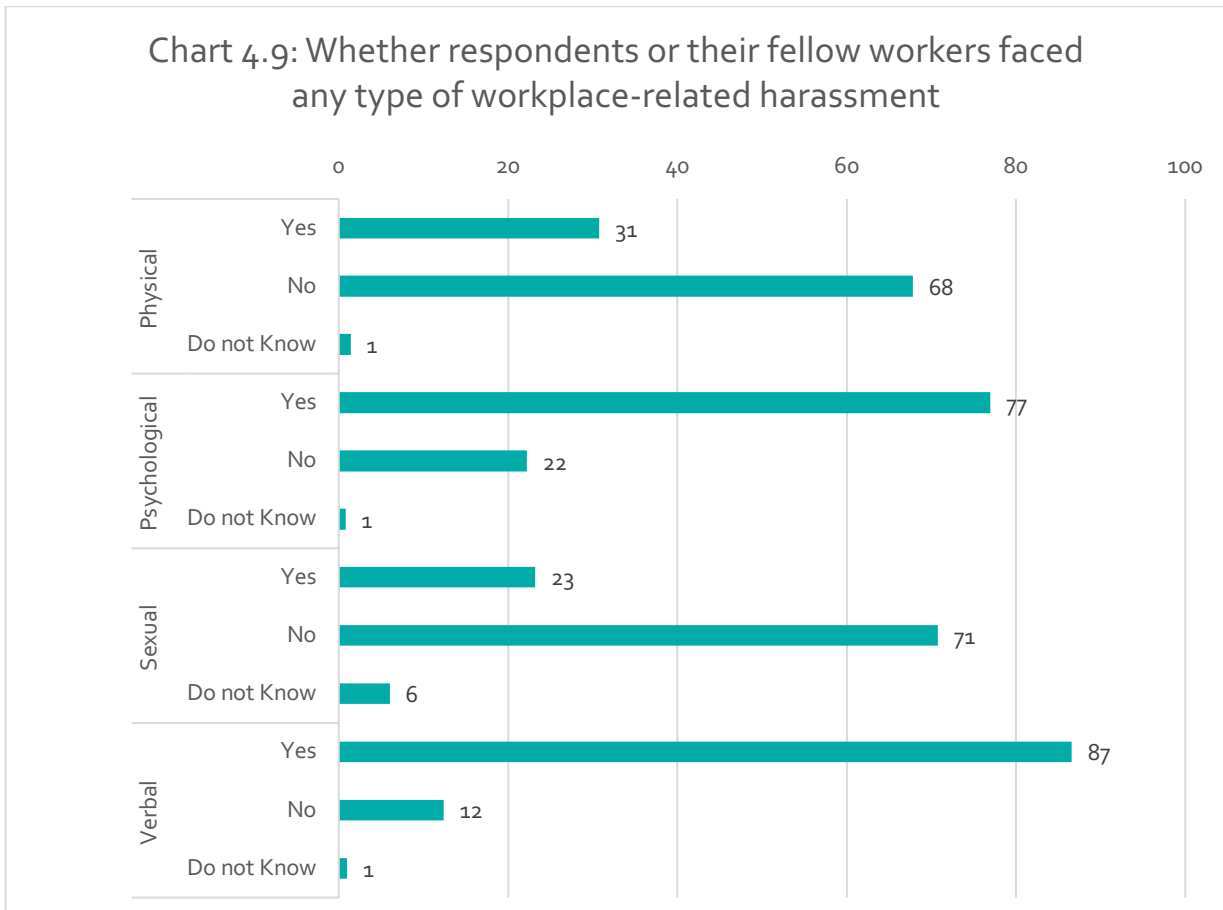


Source: Field Survey December 2020

## WORKPLACE HARASSMENT

**Harassments in multiple forms present in varying degrees:** Respondents report that various types of harassment are taking place in the workplaces of RMG workers. The nature of the harassment includes physical, psychological, sexual, and verbal.<sup>42</sup> Among these types of harassment, verbal harassment is the most common, which the workers experience regularly (87%). Psychological harassment is also very common for the workers in the RMG sector; more than three-quarters (77%) of all the respondents have reported the presence of psychological harassment at their workplaces. Moreover, according to 23% of the respondents, workers also experience harassment of a sexual nature and three in ten respondents reported the existence of physical harassment in their workplaces (Chart 4.9).

<sup>42</sup> BLA 2006 does not have any specific provision on sexual harassment. However, the Act, in section 332, states that where any female worker is employed in any work of the establishment, irrespective of her rank or status, no one of that establishment shall behave with the female worker which may seem to be indecent or repugnant to the modesty or honour of the female worker.



Source: Field Survey December 2020

Both female and male respondents gave similar responses to the level of harassment in their factory with one exception, however. Male respondents (34%) were more likely than female respondents (29%) to say that physical harassment occurred in their workplace. The responses to this question do not give an indication of who is victimised by the harassment, but rather who is more willing to recognise it and report it to the survey.

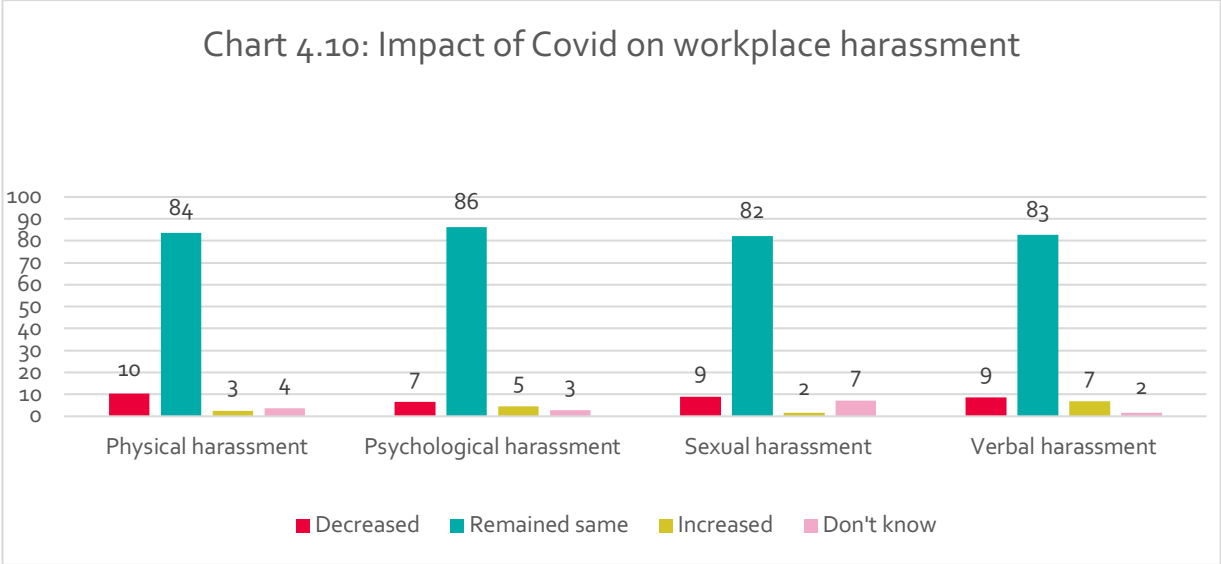
Use of slang language (gali) and rebuking are the most two common forms of verbal abuse. Of those who reported verbal harassment in their workplace (87%), around nine of every ten claimed that they experience it occasionally. About one-quarter have also talked about 'bad comments' from management personnel (FGD Dhaka). For psychological harassment, the most common form is supervisors and management keeping workers under high work pressure (88.3%). The threat of expulsion from the job also creates a psychological stress that was reported by two-thirds of the respondents (65.7%). Workers also feel stressed when they are threatened with refusal of pay, and of overtime.

Workers also reported the presence of a wide variety of sexual abuse and harassment. However, the most common is the 'obscene language'. Many women workers also reported often experiencing

'unwanted touching' of their body (57.8%) and being forced to listen to 'bad comments' concerning their attire (52.6%). Around four in every ten respondents further claimed singing/whistling with sexual connotations or innuendos is also a form of sexual abuse that the workers often face (FGD Dhaka).

For physical harassment, the common forms include pushing (73%), slapping (64%), and beating (45%).

**No significant impact of Covid on incidence of harassment:** Covid has had a very minimal impact on the incidence of harassment in the workplaces. The pandemic has neither significantly decreased nor increased the prevalence of harassment. The workers' survey noted a decreasing trend in physical, psychological, sexual, and verbal harassments, by 10%, 7%, 9%, and 9% of respondents, respectively. On the other hand, an increasing trend in these areas of harassment has been claimed by 3%, 5%, 2%, and 7% of respondents, respectively (Chart 4.10).



Source: Field Survey December 2020

The level of compliance of factories did not cause any remarkable differences regarding the incidence of harassment. Nonetheless, an increase of psychological and verbal harassment has been noticed by the respondents from non-compliant at a slightly higher rate than fully-compliant ones.

# **REPRESENTATION SECURITY**

## AVAILABILITY OF WORKERS' PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

**Very limited availability of trade unions:** The findings of the study on the availability of trade unions in the workplaces presents a sobering reality. Only six per cent of all respondents stated that a trade union is present in their factory. The low level of representation through unions is further highlighted in key informant interviews.<sup>43</sup> The availability of trade unions is slightly higher in fully-compliant factories (10%) compared to non-compliant factories (3%).

When there is a functioning union, not all workers are members. Out of the 30 respondents who reported the presence of a trade union at their workplace, just one-third (10) claimed to be a member of a trade union. Among those, the proportion of whom are women was slightly higher (7 women, 3 men).

**Multiple factors hinder workers from being a member of trade union:** There are different factors that prevent workers from being members of a trade union. Both the worker survey and the FGDs reveal similar types of factors or causes. Among these, the most frequently mentioned include the fear of losing one's job (45%) and being viewed unfavourably by management in their work situation (60%). Both reasons were mentioned more frequently by female workers compared to their male counterparts. Fear of police harassment or fear of harassment by local goons/mastans was mentioned by many respondents as the contributing factors for not being involved with a trade union. These fears are more prevalent among male workers than female. Also, untoward behaviour of the factory management hinders workers from joining a trade union. This was mainly reported by women.

**Workers' awareness of trade union's activities during Covid is low:** Lack of awareness among the workers concerning a trade union's role during Covid at their respective workplaces is noteworthy. Of the thirty respondents who reported the presence of a trade union, eighteen were unaware of what activities the unions carried out at the factory during the Covid period. The remaining respondents could, however, mention some steps taken in their workplace. These included awareness-raising activities, mask distribution, meeting with owners for negotiations on wage and leave, and relief distribution undertaken by the unions.

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<sup>43</sup> Key informant interviews with Dr. Wajedul Islam Khan, General Secretary, Bangladesh Trade Union Centre; and Tawhidur Rahaman, Former Secretary General, IBC

Over 50% (16) of these respondents did not know whether the trade unions at their factories raised any issues with the employers. Only a few workers were able to report that the union at their factories brought some demands before the employers, including due wages, bonuses, leave, factory closure, mask distribution, workers' health issues, and social distancing in the workplace.

The majority (18 of 30) were also unaware as to whether employers had had any discussions with /factory-level trade unions to take workplace-related decisions during Covid. Only three of these respondents claimed that such discussions took place between trade union and employers. They reported that these discussions focused on bonuses, payment of workers, mask distribution, help for sick workers, and wage payment.

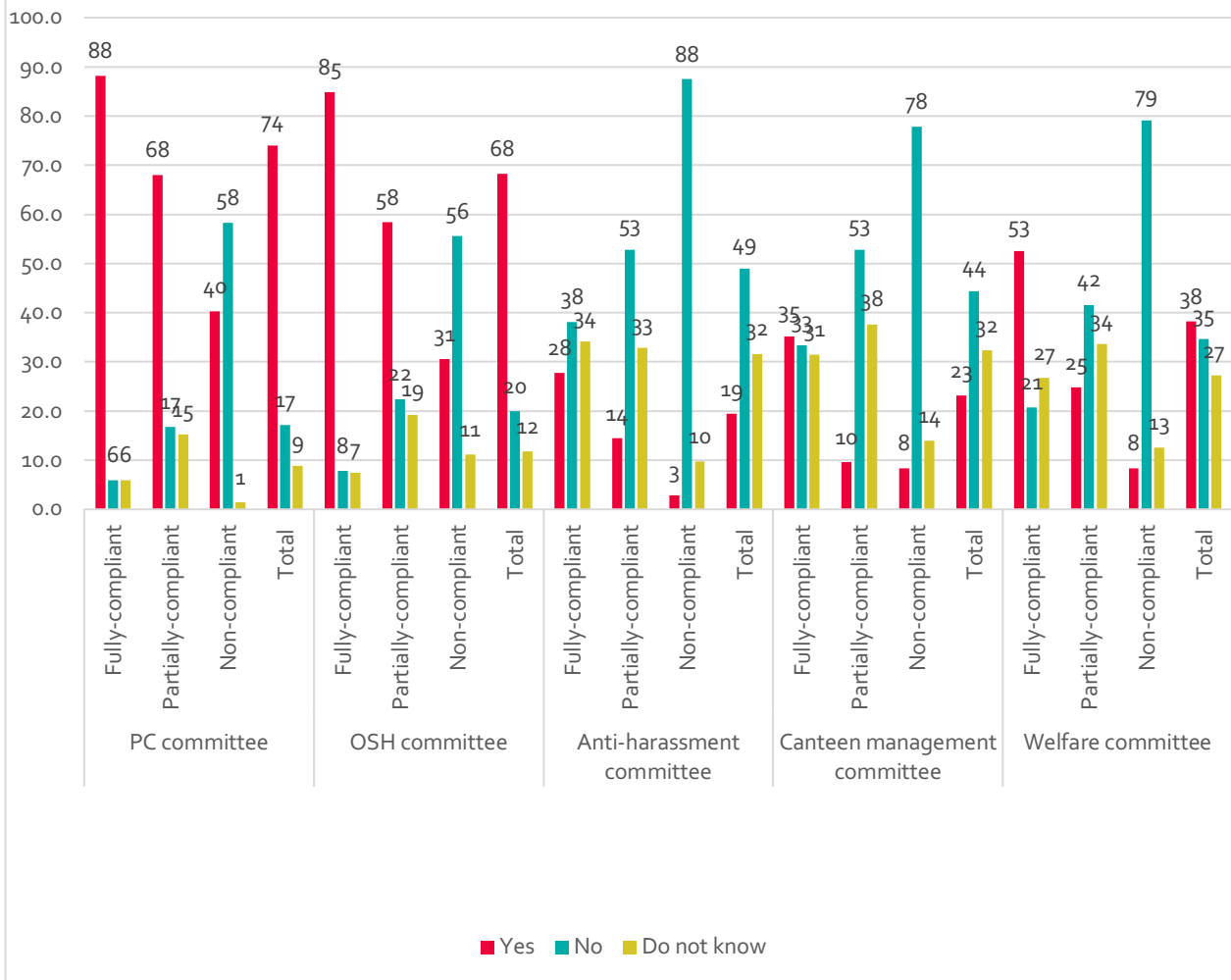
**The availability of workers' representation channels varies depending on the compliance level:**

Compliance level of the workplace has been a significant factor regarding the availability of channels for the representation of workers in the workplace. Participation committees, occupational safety and health committees, anti-harassment committees, canteen management committees, and welfare committees are the possible channels for voicing grievances within RMG factories. The research team observed that the availability of such committees is higher in compliant factories compared to partially-compliant and non-compliant factories. However, it is to be mentioned that the 100% availability of all of these channels was reported by any respondent. Nevertheless, among the several channels, participation committee is the most common (74%) where, in contrast, the anti-harassment committee is the least available channel (19.4%). Presence of occupational safety and health committees committee, anti-harassment committee and welfare committee has been reported by 68.2%, 23.2%, and 38.2% of respondents, respectively (Chart 5.1).

Many workers are also unaware of such committees. Lack of awareness is higher for the anti-harassment committees, canteen management committees, and welfare committees.



Chart 5.1: Presence of different committees according to compliance category

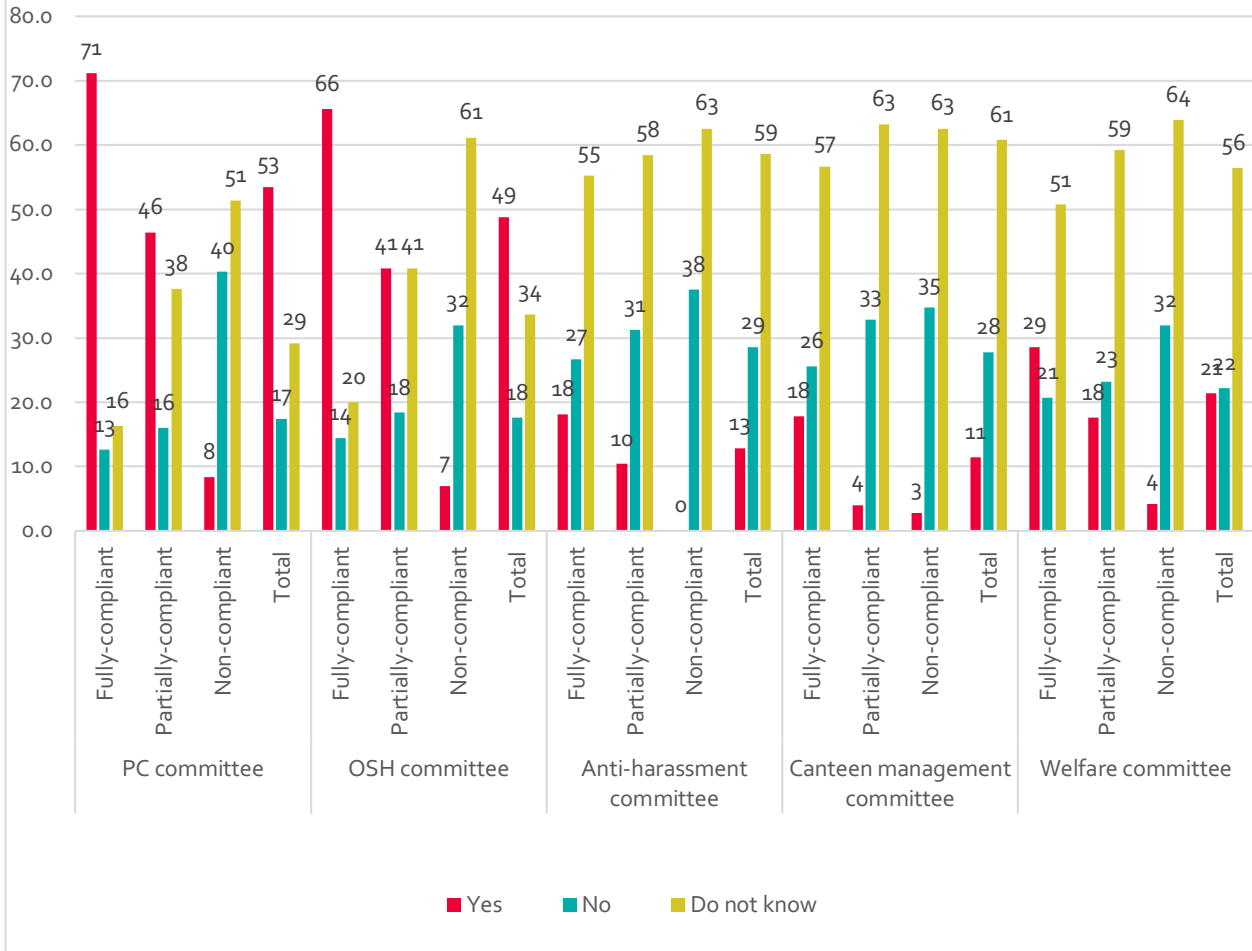


Source: Field Survey December 2020

Concerning the workers' representation in these committees, workers' lack of awareness is also noteworthy. The majority of the workers did not know whether anti-harassment committees, canteen management committees and welfare committees have representation from the workers.<sup>44</sup> Only around fifty per cent (53% and 49%, respectively) of respondents knew about workers' representation in participation committees and occupational safety and health committees. Respondents from the fully-compliant factories could mention workers' representation issues at a higher rate than those from partially-compliant and non-compliant factories (Chart 5.2).

<sup>44</sup> Key informant interviews with Sekandar Ali Mina, Executive Director, Safety and Rights Society

Chart 5.2: Workers' representation in different committees



Source: Field Survey December 2020

## COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

**Very few workers are members of the available channels:** Among the respondents, membership levels in the committees are not high; only around 5% (24 out of 500) indicated that they are members. Gender variation of the membership is also unremarkable; six per cent of female respondents are members, whereas the share among men is 3.5%. Half of these workers (12 out of 24) are a member of the occupational safety and health committee and nine are a member of the participation committees committee. Among the remaining three respondents, two are members of the anti-harassment committee and one is a member of the welfare committee.

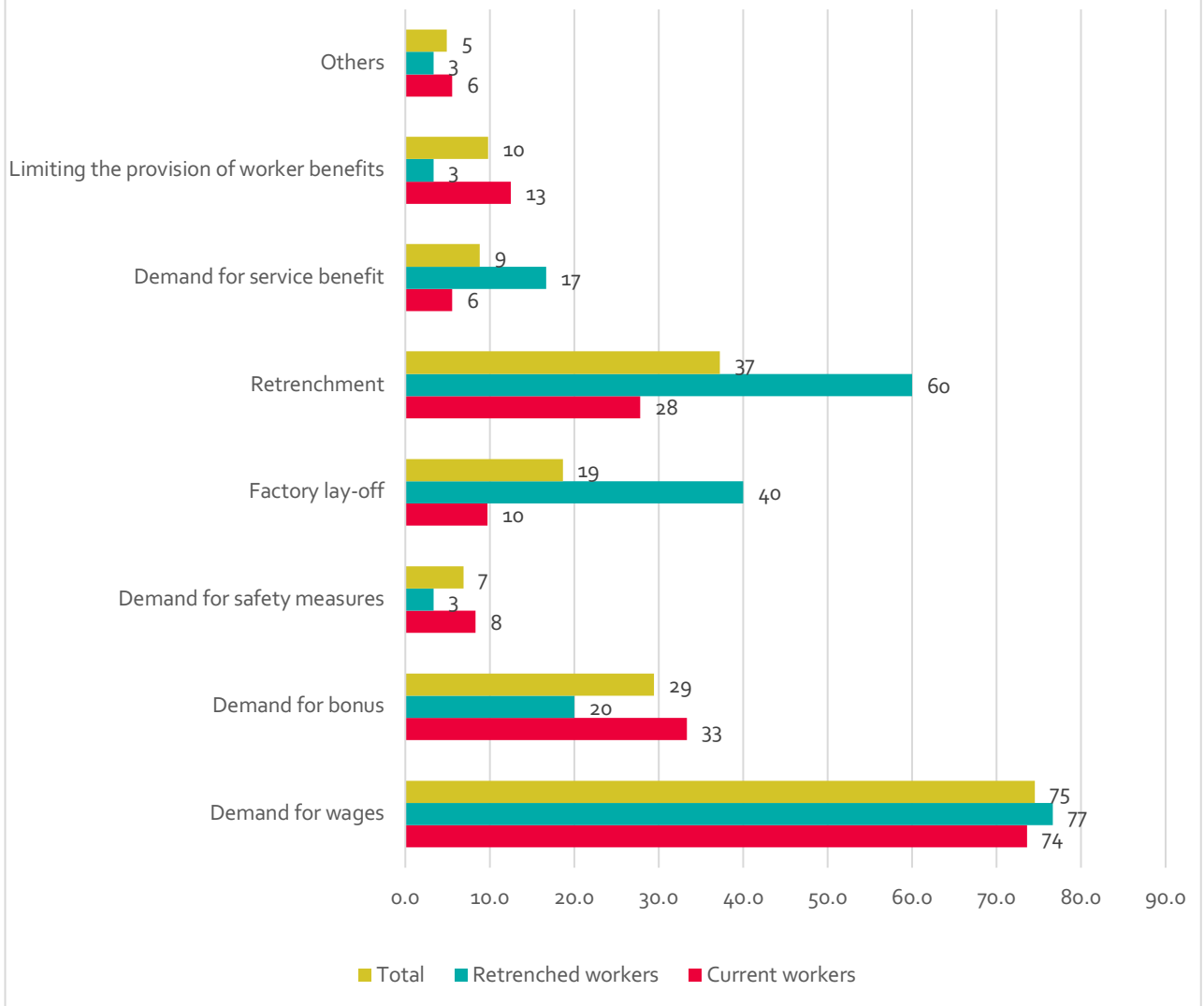
The majority of workers were unaware of the roles or activities of the available committees during Covid and this lack of awareness among the workers, concerning the meeting of these committees during the Covid period, is worth noting. Most of the respondents did not know whether any meeting was held by the anti-harassment committees, canteen management committees, and workplace welfare committees. On the other hand, 30% and 40% of respondents have not heard about a meeting of participation committees committee and occupational safety and health committee, respectively, while 39% and 27% of the respondents indicated that they are aware of participation committee and occupational safety and health committee meetings, respectively. Workers, however, did not know what issues were discussed by the meeting participants, nor did they know whether the voices of the workers were heard or respected by the factory management. (FGDs)

## **PROTEST DURING COVID AND WORKERS' PARTICIPATION**

**Worker protest, triggered by various factors, occurred in many factories, regardless of their compliance category:** The decisions of factory management and the government in response to the Covid situation triggered worker protest in many factories. One in every five respondents had observed a demonstration at their factories during the Covid period. Protests took place in all factories irrespective of the level of compliance and were reported equally by respondents working in fully-compliant, partially-compliant, and non-compliant factories.

Respondents mentioned multiple reasons for these protests. Among them, the decrease in wages was the most dominant, reported by 75% of the respondents. In addition, incidences of workers' retrenchment, bonus payment issues and factory lay-off also led to workers organising protests against the decisions taken by the factory management (Chart 5.3).

Chart 5.3: Reasons for workers protest during Covid



Source: Field Survey December 2020

**Equal participation of men and women workers in protest events:** The participation rate among the workers in these protests was quite high; approximately two-third of respondents took part in these protests. The participation rate was similar among the male workers (63%) and female workers (66%).

# **CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS**

## SUMMARY FINDINGS

Bangladesh's ready-made garment workers were profoundly affected by the Covid pandemic. The impact was felt in all four areas of workers' securities: employment, income, work, and representation.

First, in terms of **employment security**, the impact on RMG workers was most felt in the areas of employment contract, job termination and job loss. The study finds that the current RMG workers are mostly permanent workers. Only a few are temporary workers employed primarily within knit and non-compliant factories. However, differing labour violations are also noteworthy. Among these, the research noted that, the legal requirements regarding the appointment letter and service book are often not respected. Only 37% of respondents indicated that they received the appointment letter after starting the job. In addition, when the employers make it available, they often do not take the signatures of the workers in the service book. Identity cards are generally provided; ninety-three per cent of respondents had ID cards. In the majority of cases, workers' attendance is recorded by a digital punch card. The level of compliance of the factory has been a determining factor for both appointment letter, service book, and ID cards. Modern and computerised systems for attendance recording are used at a higher rate in the fully compliant factories.

The immediate impact of Covid on RMG workers include factory closures, loss of working days, retrenchment, and job loss. Nearly all (99%) of workers shared that their factories closed, on average, for a period of 40.8 days. A small proportion (9%) of respondents went to the villages when factories were declared closed. On average, each of them had to go there and back twice and experienced many difficulties on their ways to and from their native village. On average, the workers incurred the cost of BDT 3,685 for the movement to and from their village.

Loss of working days was at its highest in April 2020 followed by June 2020. In April 2020, workers were not able to work on average for 26.1 days, and in June for 20.8 days.

Four in every ten respondents claimed that their factories retrenched workers during the Covid period. Job loss and retrenchment were more commonly observed in the first three months of the Covid outbreak in the country and the rate of retrenchment was slightly higher in knit factories. When retrenching the workers, employers considered several factors including gender, the age of the workers, and the length of service in the job. Reasons for their retrenchment and job loss were mostly related to the Covid-related shipment cancellation, cancellation of work orders, and factory closure (or a section of the factory due to a drop in the work order). Furthermore, 7% lost their job because of being

involved with the workers' movements or protests during the Covid period. Employers, in general, did not follow the formal procedures for retrenchment. They neither served a prior notice, nor had they informed the worker in writing regarding their retrenchment.

With regards to **income security**, this study found that not all workers received their due wage or overtime allowance after being retrenched. Some workers, albeit a small percentage (8%), had to wait more than 60 days to get their dues. Only 6% of retrenched workers received such benefits, yet not all of them got 100% of their due benefits.

The Covid pandemic has had an intense effect on the income security of workers. The impact has been explored by looking into wages and benefits of female garment workers. The study finds that almost all the workers (95 %) received the minimum wages according to their grade structure prior to the pandemic. About 5% of workers earned less than BDT 8,000, including 11% of the workers falling in grade 7. The study found that before the pandemic the highest number of respondents (61%) averaged a monthly income in the ranges BDT 10,000 to 15,000 followed by (31%) falling in the range BDT 8,000 to 10,000. On average, workers received BDT 10,747 as a monthly wage including overtime, attendance bonuses and other allowances e.g., allowance for tiffin, and lunch. The average income from overtime work is BDT 2,004. Disaggregation by type of factory reveals that there is no major difference regarding the monthly wages of workers in knitwear, woven and composite factories. However, among the workers who are being paid less than BDT 8,000, the majority of them belong to knitwear and composite factories. Gender distribution of workers income shows that the average monthly income of male workers is higher (around 2%) than that of female, and the wage gap between men and women is BDT 162. It is evident that the average monthly income of garment workers has decreased during the Covid pandemic compared to workers' average income before the pandemic. The lowest average income of workers was recorded in April 2020 (BDT 5,425). The survey data reveals that the average income gradually increased from May 2020, though the gender wage gap existed consistently over the entire pandemic period.

Though essential and appreciated, the government-imposed lockdown and stimulus package for the month of April 2020—which enabled workers of garment factories that were closed during the imposed public holiday to receive 65% of workers' gross monthly wage—led to a significant loss in income for a large proportion of workers. According to the survey, the highest loss in worker income was observed in April 2020 followed by May 2020. Though workers' average income gradually increased from June 2020, and they were almost back at the normal salary in October 2020, the wage loss remained evident in November 2020.

The impact on **work security** covers the areas of work and working conditions of both female and male garment workers, including daily working hours, rest and leave, overtime hours, and night duty restrictions. The study finds that a similar pattern exists in regular working hours (48 hours per week) in all categories of factories, e.g., knitted, woven and composite. Additionally, no difference was observed in the regular working hours based on the compliance level of factories.

By contrast, overtime hours did vary according to level of compliance of factories, as well as among present and retrenched workers. A total of 83% of the respondents indicated that they perform overtime work. However, workers of partially-compliant factories (91%) do more overtime work than those in fully-compliant (81%) and non-compliant (79%) factories. Moreover, 81% of current workers and 94% of the retrenched workers reported that they regularly did overtime work. Worryingly, more than four in every ten workers (41%) conducted overtime that exceeds the legal limit. Excessive overtime is more prevalent in knit factories, where 62% workers undertake overtime work exceeding two hours. Excessive overtime work appears lower among the current workers (36%) than among retrenched workers (59%). Contributing factors in this regard are Covid-related order cancellations and drop-in orders etc.

It is found that RMG workers were not allowed sufficient breaks for resting. About nine in every ten current workers (89%) were not allowed to take a break or rest, except during lunchtime. It is interesting to note that the possibility for taking a break or rest is higher in non-compliant factories (21%) compared to the partially-compliant factories (7%) and fully-compliant factories (7%).

In relation to female workers doing shifts after 22:00, the difference in survey findings among the current and retrenched workers is worth mentioning. Of the current workers, 42% reported the incidence of night duty of women and of retrenched workers, 61%. However, the practise of taking written consent is not followed in most cases where more than three-quarters of the respondents indicated that consent was never taken from the female workers. Both current and retrenched workers shared similar information. The degree of compliance of the factories does not make a big difference in this regard where only 2% of all respondents (2% of the current workers, and none from the retrenched) claimed that workers 'always' can say no when night duty is scheduled.

Covid has influenced the working hours, overtime, rest periods, and night duties of the workers. This impact, however, has been diverse. Pre-Covid, festival leave, and weekly holiday were the two most common types of leave taken by the workers: 84% and 81% of workers, respectively, reported that



they always took these types of leave. During the Covid period, the practice concerning festival leave and weekly holiday leave remained unchanged according to the opinion of most of the workers. However, some changes have been observed in relation to the provision of sick leave and casual leave. Possibly because the workload in many factories has decreased and possibly because there is a risk of a sick employee passing on Covid to other workers, employers of some factories now allow workers to take sick leave. However, 14% of respondents have claimed that workers are now afraid of asking for sick leave and casual leave, citing the fear of losing their job as the main reason for this.

The decrease in production pressure during Covid was mentioned more frequently by the respondents from knit factories (43%), while an increase in workload has been reported relatively more by the respondents of composite factories (31%). Overall, 16% of respondents reported an increase in production pressure. No change in the employment contract, however, was seen despite the changes in workload during Covid. Most employers (93%) have not changed their workers' employment contract. There is also a lack of awareness among workers on the provisions of the employment contracts.

Fully-compliant factories provide maternity leave at a higher level (91%) than the partially-compliant (83%) and non-compliant (63%) factories. However, even if maternity leave is provided, the legal provisions are often not followed fully in many factories. According to 43% of the respondents, the legal requirements regarding the length of leave is not followed. Availability of paid leave has been reported at a higher rate by the respondents from fully-compliant factories (94%) so it is found that compliance makes a difference in the practice and availability of maternity leave. The Covid situation brought no remarkable changes in the practice of providing maternity leave.

Healthcare provisions and services have been continuing in most of the factories during the Covid period. Only 11 respondents out of 400 current workers (3%) have reported suspension of healthcare services during Covid-19.

On reproductive health issues, workers generally do not get any special treatment during menstruation. Six in every ten respondents indicated that there is no special treatment, while 12% do not know whether any facility is provided. Providing menstruating workers with sanitary napkins at a subsidised cost is an exceedingly rare practice, which was only found in 7% of the factories.

The lack in the provision of information to workers regarding SRHR is noteworthy. Seven in every ten respondents noted that such information was not provided. Only a few workers could talk about family

planning related information, but most workers shared that pregnant women workers received some special attention or treatment.

With regards to measures put in place to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, 88% of the respondents have noticed such measures. The most common initiatives, reported by more than 80% of respondents, included the checking of the body temperature and the availability of soap for handwashing. The least available measures, reported by 20% of respondents, included the supply of gloves, installing disinfecting chambers, and the supply of head coverings or caps.

The availability of welfare and social protection measures before and during Covid has yet to be ensured. None of the facilities, which include including day-care, a breastfeeding corner, canteen, gratuity, provident fund, and accident injury compensation, among others, were available in the factories of the respondents. The situation was worse for gratuity and provident fund; only 27% and 18% respondents' employers made such facilities available to workers. The Covid pandemic made the conditions worse; a declining trend has been reported for all the services. Employers have generally not introduced any new facilities for the workers during the Covid period except for the Covid-related health protection measures.

Regarding the prevalence of workplace harassment, the survey found that verbal harassment is the most common harassment type which workers face (87%). Psychological harassment is also very common (77%). According to 23% of respondents, workers were also subjected to sexual harassment. Furthermore, three in every ten respondents have noticed the existence of physical harassments at their workplaces. Male respondents were more likely to report that physical harassment occurred in their factory, but there was not difference in gender with regards to responses about verbal, psychological or sexual harassment that was caused by Covid. Respondents stated that Covid has had a very minimal impact on the incidences of harassment within the workplace. The frequency of the occurrence of harassments has remained almost the same throughout, but surprisingly, the level of compliance of the factories does not make a remarkable difference with regard to harassment.

When considering the **representation securities**, the research looked into participation in social dialogue and workplace decision-making. Trade unions in the workplaces remain rare. The presence of trade unions is slightly higher in fully-compliant factories (10%) than in non-compliant factories (3%). Several different factors prevent workers becoming members of a trade union. Among these factors, the most frequently mentioned are fear of job loss (45%) and fear of being assigned to unfavourable work (60%). There is also a lack of awareness among the workers concerning the role of trade union's

during Covid at their respective workplaces. Of the thirty respondents that reported the existence of a trade union at their factory, slightly more than half of the respondents (16) indicated that they did not know whether the trade union raised any issue to the employers. The majority (18 of 30) were also unaware whether employers had had any discussions with factory-level trade unions in order to mitigate the impact of Covid on workplace working conditions.

The degree of compliance of factories was a significant determining factor regarding the availability of dialogue channels of representation in the workplace where the availability of different committees is more evident in compliant factories. Workers relatively lack more awareness about the anti-harassment committee, canteen management committee, and welfare committee. The majority of workers did not know whether anti-harassment committees, canteen management committees and welfare committees have incorporated representatives from the workers. Respondents from the fully-compliant factories could mention the existence of different types of workers' representation at a higher rate.

Only a few of the interviewed workers are members of different committees: Only 5% (24 out of 500) of respondents had indicated that they were members. Gender variation of the membership was also unremarkable.

The lack of awareness among workers concerning meetings of these committees, or the outcomes of such meetings, during the Covid period is worth mentioning. In general, workers were unaware whether the voices of workers were heard or respected by the factory management.

Regarding the incidence of protests during Covid and workers' participation therein, one in every five workers indicated that a protest or demonstration occurred at their factories. The level of compliance was not a determining factor in regard to the incidence of protests, which took place in all types of factories. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the drop in income was the most important reason for worker protest. Equal participation of men and women workers in worker protests was observed.

In sum, in all of the workers' securities areas, the study finds that Covid has had significant impacts on the jobs, livelihoods and well-being of ready-made garment workers and their families, particularly on women workers. The impacts are falling disproportionately on those who were already in precarious circumstances and who have the least ability to withstand the additional impacts of the situation. In particular, the workplace closure measures caused massive losses in jobs and working hours. Workers

lacking proper protection of their rights at work and lack social protections suffered high decline in terms of their work, employment, and income securities.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

To withstand these challenges amid the Covid pandemic, the following strategic directions are put forward for better ensuring work, income, employment, and representation securities for garment workers.

- **Prioritise immediate support for vulnerable workers, jobs, and income:** Urgent steps are required in the short-term to avoid enterprise closures, job losses and income decline and mitigate the shift in work and labour to the domestic sphere. Interventions should build on existing institutions, while steering workers and enterprises towards sustainable development for a better and stronger recovery.
- **Hold employers responsible for workers:** Employers cannot avoid or ignore the responsibility for workers and working conditions. Responsibility must be upheld for violations of standards and devising strategies for evading legal obligations.
- **Support gender-balanced social dialogue:** workers, but in particular, women, are often underrepresented in social dialogue / union structures; therefore, responses to Covid-19 risk not including women's voices, even though they are highest affected in the garment industry due to their low power, low pay position. Strong responses to Covid support the inclusion of women and other workers in vulnerable positions in negotiations on wages, benefits, and health and safety committees. In the long-term, ensure that women's voices are included in future negotiations through creating and promoting opportunities for women's leadership in worker representation and unions.
- **Extend social protection coverage and outreach:** Besides the immediate and direct impact for workers at risk and those workers who have already lost their incomes, well-designed social protection measures can contribute to a gradual transition from vulnerability to decent livelihoods. Increasing social protection can, in particular, mitigate the structural inequalities for women in the system, alleviating care responsibilities and providing protections for those who lost job or with less secure employment. Establishing decent work thresholds and strong social protection measures is important. Decent minimum (living) wage thresholds, and employment and accident insurance need to be established.
- **Develop employment retention measures:** Retention measures (including wage subsidies) should be delivered in an integrated manner with active labour market policies. Measures should focus on avoiding and reducing vulnerability, especially for women and families

providing childcare that find it particularly hard to re-enter labour markets once they are forced to exit.

- **Ensure a comprehensive approach to returning to work:** Combatting the pandemic and restarting the economy are not competing priorities. The false dichotomy between returning to work and protecting health needs to be dispelled. Strong measures will still be needed for the foreseeable future, based on proper social dialogue, to help enterprises to function again and workers to return to work as safely. Furthermore, measures need to be put in place to support workers, and particularly women, to deal with their care responsibilities. Moreover, consider providing and promoting family care leave to male workers, and encouraging more gender-balanced social norms so that men can share care responsibilities with women.
- **Ensure safe and accessible workplaces:** To make workplaces safe, similar measures may be necessary as those taken for essential workers during the acute health crisis phase. Measures relating to occupational safety and health (OSH), social protection coverage, anti-discrimination and others may also be needed.
- **Strengthen labour regulation by making it more female-friendly:** Labour law should address the issues of sexual harassment, night duty, length of maternity leave, special consideration for women workers during menstruation, and proportional representation. Effective anti-harassment committees with appropriate representation of female workers should be formed at every workplace.
- **Establish transparent capability-building measures:** With the expected changes in the world of work, there will be workers who will have to transition to new sectors and occupations as well as new forms of work. While the recovery process in the ready-made garment sector is taking shape, they should have the opportunity to be (re-)trained, build digital skills and capabilities that help them to cope with the transition. Explicit workplace promotion policies, that provide perspective to workers to be promoted to higher grade levels, need to be established. Workplace should have appropriate policies that would show the career path to the women garment workers.
- **Increase rights awareness among workers:** Increasing the awareness of women workers on issues such as the calculation of overtime compensation, consent for night duty, workers' organisation, and participation in workplaces committees ultimately will make them capable to claim their rights as well as achieve a decent workplace and working environment.



# ANNEX



**ANNEX TABLE 1.1 DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY AREA, GENDER, AND TYPES OF WORKERS**

Study Areas		Total Number of respondents	Current Workers			Retrenched Workers		
			Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Dhaka	Mirpur, Kafrul Pallabi	29	15	8	23	3	3	6
	Uttora Abdulpur	30	15	9	24	4	2	6
	Badda Rampura	27	15	10	25	1	1	2
	Savar, Ashulia	39	15	13	28	7	4	11
	Total	125	60	40	100	15	10	25
Gazipur	Boardbazar, Tongi, Malekerbari	48	21	16	37	6	5	11
	Vogra, Joydebpur	31	19	12	31			
	Konabari	32	20	12	32			
	Kaliakair	14				9	5	14
	Total	125	60	40	100	15	10	25
Narayanganj	Fotulla, Panchabati, Bisic	49	22	18	40	5	4	9
	Siddirganj	38	20	9	29	6	3	9
	EPZ Area	38	18	13	31	4	3	7
	Total	125	60	40	100	15	10	25
Chottogram	Kalurghat	39	20	11	31	5	3	8
	EPZ, Bandar	40	20	12	32	5	3	8
	Sagorika, Bayazid	46	20	17	37	5	4	9
	Total	125	60	40	100	15	10	25
<b>Total Survey Respondents</b>		<b>500</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

**ANNEX TABLE 1.2: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS**

	Frequency	%
<b>Age of Respondents</b>		
15-17 years	11	2.2
18-29 years	286	57.2
30-35 years	163	32.6
36-40 years	30	6
40+ years	10	2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Unmarried	118	23.6
Married	361	72.2
Widow	6	1.2
Divorced/separated	15	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>100</b>

**ANNEX TABLE 1.3: WORKPLACE RELATED INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS**

	Frequency	%
<b>Type of Factory</b>		
Knit	210	42
Oven	213	42.6
Composite	77	15.4
<b>Category of factory</b>		
A (fully-complaint)	270	54
B (partially-complaint)	125	25
C (non-complaint)	72	14.4
Do Not know	33	6.6
<b>Number of Factory Workers</b>		
Do not know	15	3
500 or less	58	11.6
501-800	31	6.2
801 -1000	39	7.8
1001 3000	181	36.2
3001 -8000	98	19.6
8001 -10000	63	12.6
10001- 15000	9	1.8
15000+	6	1.2
<b>Current grade of salary received</b>		
7th grade	188	37.6
6th grade	64	12.8
5th grade	91	18.2
4th grade	94	18.8
3rd grade	63	12.6
<b>Section respondent worked</b>		
Sewing	346	69.2
Finishing	82	16.4
Packaging	24	4.8
Others	48	8.6
<b>Working Experience in garment sector</b>		
1 year or less	19	3.8
1 to 2 years	137	27.4
2 to 3 years	128	25.6
3 to 5 years	150	30
5 to 10 years	66	13.2
<b>Working experience in current factory</b>		

<b>Less than 1 year</b>	49	12.3
<b>1 to 3 years</b>	177	44.3
<b>3 to 5 years</b>	88	22
<b>5 to 8 years</b>	51	12.8
<b>8 to 12 years</b>	25	6.3
<b>More than 12 years</b>	10	2.5

Source: Field Survey December 2020

## ANNEX BOX 1.1: METHODOLOGY NOTES

The questionnaire for the face-to-face survey was developed initially in English incorporating appropriate closed and open-ended questions and then it was translated into Bengali for the field data collection. A piloting was done to finalise the questionnaire.

A team of 12 field enumerators (10 female and 2 male) with guidelines from 2 data collection supervisors undertook field surveys in respective locations. Information was collected through face-to-face interviews outside the factory premises or in the home environment. Considering the Covid situation, special protective measures were taken for face-to-face interviews. Enumerators maintained social distancing while conducting the interviews. In addition, personal protective equipment (e.g. face masks, gloves, hand sanitiser) were provided for both enumerators and respondents. Detailed instructions in this regard were provided to the enumerators during training sessions.

The field enumerators personally contacted the respondents and obtained the desired information fairly and accurately by explaining the objectives of the study to the respondents and following the methodology of research. The field supervisors visited each location participating in the field survey and checked the survey undertaken by the field investigators. Once validated by the field supervisors, the filled in questionnaires were submitted to the core team for quality-control checks and subsequent computerisation of the data.

A sound quality control system was developed to adequately monitor the quality of data collection. The questionnaire was fully crosschecked by the enumerators to minimise the number of data mistakes. The field supervisor and core team members constantly moved around the sample spots; and ensured quality data through field checking, and data monitoring.

Field checking was undertaken in both the 'presence' and 'absence' of the interviewing teams. 'Checking in presence' meant verification of the work of an interviewing team in a sample area during the time of the interview. 'Checking in absence' meant verification of the work of an interviewing team in a sample area after the team had left the site, having completed its assigned work in the area. During field checking, the field-supervisors performed re-interviews, and checked the data accuracy. Field checking in presence' was conducted for all field investigators, while 'field checking in absence' was done over randomly selected sites. The reported non-response items were checked to ensure that they are all due to valid reasons. Data monitoring was done by comparing results of some key variables in the completed questionnaires, tabulating the variables by interviewing teams, sample sites and investigators.

Data management for this study comprised of: (a) registration of questionnaires received from the field; (b) data processing; and (c) computerisation of data. As soon as the questionnaires were received from the field, those were entered into registration books in to ensure that the core study team has received all schedules received from the field. The data processing activities involved: editing and coding of the questionnaire, and computerisation of data. The core study team members undertook the editing. The members of the core team randomly checked the edited schedules after verification. Responses to open-ended questions were recorded verbatim. In order to meaningfully present and analyse such questions, categorisation of those responses was

done. After the categorisation was complete, and the coding scheme finally accepted, responses to the open-ended questions in every schedule was categorised and coded, using the coding scheme.

Quantitative data collected through the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS v22. The quantitative data analysis was done in various steps such as frequency tables, cross tabulation and graphical presentation. Data was analysed at both univariate and bivariate level. Qualitative data was analysed by coding meeting notes with initial concepts and grouping data to identify key study themes, and finally analysing the interview, focus group, and meeting notes related to each theme to draw out key findings.

# FGD Participants

FGD Participant List Chottogram (Current workers)

Date: 23 December 2020

Venue: Workers Café

Name	Factory
Mohammad Sohel	Clifton Textile Ltd.
Asma Begam	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Parvin Begam	Bayzid Tex Ltd
Sharmin Akter	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Afaj	SKDM fashion Ltd.
Mohammad Sujon Mia	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Abdul Kader	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Md. hanif	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Baby Begam	RDM Fashion

FGD Participant List Chottogram (Retrenched workers)

Date: 23 December 2020

Venue: Workers Café

Name	Designation	Worked in
Md. Shafikul Hossain	Small business	KDS Fashion Ltd
Najma Begam	Housewife	Adil Garments
Ayesha Begam	Housewife	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Kulsuma Begam	Prepare paper bag	Marsh Apperal Ltd.
Jubeda Begam	Contractual worker	KDS Fashion Ltd.
Kajal Begam	Small Business (selling cloth)	Highbeach Spa Ltd
Khadeja Begam	Tailoring	BS Group.
MD. Rafiqul Islam	unemployed	SKDM Ltd.

FGD Participant List Narayanganj (Current workers)

Date: 27 December 2020

Venue: Workers Café

Name	Designation	Factory Name
Monoara	Operator	Civic Ltd
Amena	Helper	New Jeson Ltd
Morium	Helper	New Jeson Ltd
Lili	Operator	New Jeson Ltd
Mehedi	Operator	Civic Ltd
Mahamuda	Helper	Gazi Net Wear Ltd
Putul	Helper	New Jeson Ltd
Shahana	Operator	New Jeson Ltd
Marzina	Operator	New Jeson Ltd
Emon	Helper	Gazi Net Wear Ltd

FGD Participant List Mirpur (Retrench Workers)

Date: 26 December 2020

Venue: Workers Café

Name	Designation	Factory
Eti	Operator	Lodstar Garments
Fatema	Operator	Palka Garments
Nazma	Operator	Palka Garments
Sufia	Operator	Palka Garments
Rashida	Operator	MBM Garments
Jimi	Operator	MBM Garments
Jabeda	Operator	Vision Garments
Laboni	Operator	Palka Dots Ltd
Ridash	Operator	Opex Garments Ltd
Parvez	Operator	Opex Garments

FGD Participant List Tangi (Current workers)



Date: 24 December 2020

Venue: Workers Café

Name	Designation	Factory
Shirin Akhter	Operator	Rumana Fashion
Kalpana	Helper	Zaber Zubaer
Bakul	Helper	Tiles Garments
Shuman Miah	Operator	Windy Fashion
Obaydul	Operator	Shumi Garments
Nasrin	Operator	Shumi Garments
Rozina	Operator	Zaber Zubaer
Nazma	Helper	Ananta Garments
Monoara	Operator	Pentaon Fashion Ltd
Khodeza	Helper	Pentaon Fashion Ltd
Anukul	Operator	Ever Fashion Ltd
Maya	Quality	Pentaon Fashion Ltd

FGD Participant List Mirpur (Current workers)

Date: 25 December 2020

Venue: Workers Café

Name	Designation	Factory
Hosne Ara	Operator	MBM Garments Ltd
Parvin	Operator	Opex Garments
Hawa	Operator	Opex Garments
Rubi	Operator	Opex Fashion Ltd
Rita	Helper	Opex Fashion Ltd
Parvin	Operator	Sharoj Garments
Kohinoor	Operator	Dream Wear Ltd
Mahi	Operator	Dream Wear Ltd
Nilufa	Operator	Opex Garments