

ILO survey reveals COVID-19 impact on Bangladeshi women garment workers

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3 December 2020

A recent report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) entitled “Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the garment sector” points to the toll of the pandemic on female workers in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

Published in early November, it draws from “Better Work,” an earlier collaboration between the ILO and the International Finance Corporation on the conditions of garment employees in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kenya, Lesotho and Vietnam.

While the stated aim of “Better Work” is to “improve working conditions in the garment industry and make the sector more competitive,” its real concern is that rising job and wage uncertainties accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic will produce social explosions in these countries.

In 2019, the garment industry employed an estimated 65 million workers in the Asia-Pacific, accounting for 75 percent of all garment workers worldwide. Over four million of these workers are employed in Bangladesh, with women accounting for roughly 80 percent of the workforce.

The ILO’s November report warns that garment workers in lower- and middle-income countries confront a “high risk” of job losses and decreased working hours because of the pandemic. “These job losses,” it continues, “are likely to disproportionately impact women.” The positions that are destroyed “may well never return.”

COVID-19 continues to rage unchecked through Bangladesh, with the government insisting that workers and the rest of the population accept this as the new normal. According to yesterday’s statistics, almost 470,000 have been infected and the death toll has climbed to 6,713.

In Bangladesh, tens of thousands of garment workers

were retrenched following the government’s limited and ill-prepared lock down. Many of these workers, the report states, “are still owed wages for completed work” and are “unable to access basic necessities such as food, rent money or medical expenses for their households... Without adequate social protection measures and safety nets in place, loss of wages means that millions of workers and their families are facing poverty and hunger.”

The report notes women workers “are more likely to be directly and indirectly discriminated against” when they are retrenched because they take maternity and pregnancy leave or have to take time off for other medical conditions and family responsibilities. Garment industry employers are also less likely to rehire female workers close to or over the age of 35, opting to hire younger women.

The report states that some factory owners have used the pandemic to inflict “economic harm” on workers using “unacceptable practices, such as withholding information about actual pay and hours and not paying correctly for overtime.”

When the Bangladeshi government “reopened” the economy in late April, the report continues, factory owners did not implement serious measures to prevent workers being infected by COVID-19. In fact, physical distancing—whether on company-provided or public transportation, at workplaces or overcrowded factory-provided accommodation—could not be observed.

The pandemic has also produced rising rates of depression and mental stress amongst all workers and the young. “Unemployment has harmful health effects on both women and men workers, with men more susceptible to some forms of immediate ill-health,” the report states.

The study references previous pandemics, such as

severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and H1N1 (swine flu), which produced high levels of depression and a greater risk of suicide amongst unemployed men. A webinar held in late October by the Citizen's Platform revealed that two-thirds of young people surveyed said they were depressed about their future income prospects and were undergoing mental stress.

Referring to social indices from previous economic recessions, the ILO study observes that long-term unemployment amongst women garment workers has a serious impact on the well-being of their families.

It states, the “loss of women workers’ incomes in lower-income households has a greater longer-term impact when compared to men because women tend to invest more of their income in their children’s health services, education and nutrition.”

In a lame and utopian appeal to the Bangladeshi ruling elite, the ILO study calls for “effective amelioratory actions” to prevent a return to the “pre-existing inequalities.” It also advocates a continuation of what it claims were “previous important gains regarding poverty reduction and gender equality in the garment sector.”

These appeals will fall on deaf ears. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government are focussed on protecting big business and the wealthy. The Hasina government responded to the pandemic with 21 stimulus packages—a total of \$US14.14 billion, according to the *Financial Express*—with only a pittance going to workers and the poor.

The Hasina government claims that its development programmes are on track to officially elevate the country’s status from the current least developed country to a so-called “developing country” in 2024. This label has no real meaning for the millions of poverty stricken Bangladeshi workers.

While Bangladesh’s gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate has averaged about eight percent in the past five years, it is expected to drop to 4.4 percent in 2020. The World Bank, however, predicts that it will fall to just 1.6 percent this year.

None of this growth has reduced the vast gap between the rich and poor, with the lion’s share of any increase in the national income going to the wealthy. In 2015, the richest 5 percent of the population were 121 times richer than the poorest 5 percent. The impact of COVID-19 will only deepen this social gulf.

The terrible plight facing tens of thousands Bangladeshi garment employees was revealed in a recent comment by a young worker to the CNBC network.

Prior to the pandemic outbreak in March this year, 22-year-old Mousumi had a new job at a garment factory and was making about 10,000 taka (\$118) a month. She lost her job after the lockdown and joined a new factory in August. She now earns just 8,500 taka per month, far less than what she was paid at the previous plant.



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