

**Timeline**

April 2020 - July 2021

**Study Type**

Descriptive / Surveillance

**Research Implemented by IPA**

Yes

# COVID-19 and the Lives of Female Workers in the Readymade Garment Sector

## Researchers

Christopher Woodruff (Oxford University); Atonu Rabbani (University of Dhaka); Hannah Uckat (World Bank)

## Abstract

The ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh is the main source of formal wage employment for women that constitute a majority of its 4 million workers. The sector has been instrumental in increasing women's labour force participation in Bangladesh. Demand-side constraints and health concerns introduced by COVID-19 forced factory closures across Dhaka and Chittagong for much of April 2020. Even though factories reopened in May 2020 and the government established a US\$590 million loan program to support salary payments for workers, many reportedly did not receive salaries for March due to order cancellations and furloughs.

This study aims to understand the impact of the crisis on workers' employment, income, food security, and well-being in the short run, to assess whether women are differentially affected by coping strategies, e.g. through disproportionate restrictions on their bargaining power or decreases in their consumption. In the medium term, the study hopes to analyse how workers cope with the greater uncertainty in the garment sector and the effects of the uncertain recovery of the sector on workers. For women in particular, the study aims to understand the effects of the crisis on continued participation in the industry and career aspirations, and whether the decrease in garment sector employment leads women to break into other, formerly male-dominated, industries. Ultimately, this research will support the development of policy recommendations about support measures required for different workers, especially vulnerable groups of workers, during times of crisis.

Researchers collected data from 2,000 current and past workers through four rounds of

telephone surveys conducted in April, June, September, and December that focused on information about income, expenditures, household decision-making, and stress. Initial results indicate that women report significantly higher levels of stress (6.5 percent of women compared to 2.5 percent of men reported moderate or severe levels of stress). Between February and March 2021, a marketing call was conducted with a randomly selected subgroup of 559 RMG workers employed as line operators to encourage them to utilize a telephone-based counselling service. In the fifth round, completed over March and April, 2021 researchers expanded the survey to collect information about who the respondents go to with mental health or stress issues, and their attitudes toward counselling.

*This project is a part of the Women's Work, Entrepreneurship, and Skilling (WWES) Initiative.*

## Project Outcomes of Interest

This project uses descriptive data on the impact of the pandemic on female RMG workers' income, expenditures, household decision-making, and stress to identify specific dimensions on which they have been impacted; uptake of remote mental health counselling services.

## Key Findings

RMG workers experienced sharp reductions in economic well-being at the beginning of the pandemic, but their incomes rebounded quickly. However, participants' levels of stress increased towards the end of 2020.

- **Economic outcomes plummeted in the first months of the pandemic but rebounded quickly.** Participants' base salaries were halved during the month of April, and their overall household incomes declined by a similar amount. Households' average incomes returned to 90 percent of pre-pandemic levels within a few months, and rebounded fully by the end of 2020. The recovery was slower, however, for the poorest 25 percent of households, and those in the bottom ten percent remained below their pre-pandemic income levels.
- **Households cut food consumption, with women bearing the brunt of the impact.** Overall, households experienced a dip in food consumption that followed a similar pattern to income, though it was less severe. Households reduced consumption of protein-rich foods like meat, fish, and eggs. In the first survey round, consumption cuts were distributed equally between men and women, but as time went on, women reduced their consumption significantly more than men on average.
- **Stress and anxiety increased after the worst economic conditions had passed.** Participants' reported levels of stress rose significantly in late 2020. In September, fewer than ten percent of participants reported moderate or severe stress, but by December that figure was over 20 percent. Participants identified worry about having enough food to feed their families and illness in their households as particularly salient causes. Women reported particularly high rates of anxiety, frequently related to an ill family member.

In response, the research team began piloting a telephone-based counseling program for households experiencing pandemic-related stress. Take-up of the intervention was modest, with 13 percent of those invited to participate having at least one telephone counselling session. Among those using the services, the average call duration was only eight minutes. These doubtless reflect the challenges of offering counselling among participants in jobs with very long work hours. There were no significant effects of the counselling on anxiety levels, but there was some effect in reducing worries about having enough food to feed their families.

## Impact Goals

- Improve women's health, safety, and economic empowerment

## Project Data Collection Mode

- CATI (Computer-assisted telephone interviewing)

## Results Status

Results

## Link to Questionnaire

[Survey - COVID-19 and the Lives of Female Workers in the Readymade Garment Sector](#)