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Toward the Development of Post Covid-19 Gender Policy and Accountability Measures to End Modern Slavery in the Bangladeshi Garment Sector: A Policy Brief for the UK Government and Stakeholders

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The research was carried out by Muhammed Azizul Islam, Pamela Abbott, Shamima Haque, Fiona Gooch and Salma Akhter.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Court of the University of Aberdeen, the Arts and Humanities Research Council or the UK Modern Slavery Policy and Evidence Centre.

Policy Brief for the UK Government and Stakeholders

This policy brief focuses on gender discrimination in the RMG in Bangladesh during the Covid-19 pandemic. Bangladesh has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and signed up to the SDGs, committing to promote gender justice to ensure that women can claim and exercise their rights under domestic and international law. However, Bangladesh employment law offers little protection to women, and what protection it offers is not enforced. Factory owners and managers disregard the law with impunity. This policy brief highlights the vulnerability of women Ready Made Garment (RMG) workers, particularly in factories that produced garments for the UK retailers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. This briefing calls upon the various stakeholders, including international retailers, including those in the UK, the UK government and RMG factory owners, to promote gender justice for women RMG workers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made women in the RMG sector even more vulnerable. At the start of the pandemic, in March 2020, media and civil society reports highlighted that many international buyers (including UK based retailers) had cancelled orders and were delaying payments for orders already delivered. This was estimated to have affected 1,200 factories leaving around 2.8 million workers at risk of being laid off without pay. When the Bangladesh Government ordered a lockdown in late March 2021, many workers were laid off without pay, while some workers were forced to continue working through the first lockdown to enable factories to meet orders still on the books. Factories were reopened in late April 2020 before the lockdown was lifted and have remained open since, leaving workers at increased risk of getting Covid-19. When buyers started to place orders again, they demanded large discounts, which put pressure on owners to reduce the cost of production, mainly by demanding increased labour productivity.

In response to the broader concerns over working conditions during the pandemic, our research has investigated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women workers in the export garment sector in Bangladesh. Our research also explores gaps in gender policy and regulations for preventing exploitation within the industry.



[A research assistant of this project captured this photo: garments workers are going to the factory]

Highlights of research findings

To achieve our research aims, we interviewed workers, key stakeholder groups, including trade union leaders, industry leaders, government policymakers, development agencies, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UN Women, between January and July 2021. Our key research findings are:

- The disruptions from Covid-19 exacerbated interrelated vulnerabilities in economic security, job security, food security, housing security and health and wellbeing, resulting in women workers struggling to support themselves and their families.
- These severe disruptions and devastating impacts on workers were exacerbated &, in some cases, directly caused by retailers and brands selling into the UK and other markets in the Global North.
- In the factories there were more cases of sexual violence during Covid-19 time. There was also an increase in verbal abuse and symbolic violence, mainly from line supervisors pushing women to work faster to meet unrealistic production targets.

- The legal framework regulating the supply chain fails to bring the actions of businesses and governments into line with the standards of the international conventions designed to protect and promote the rights of women in employment that Bangladesh has ratified.
- Even where Bangladesh's legal framework regulating the industry protects workers, some employers disregard it with impunity.
- Social compliance auditors do not always include women's equal rights issues in their audits, and 40% of auditors surveyed do not audit the right to trade union recognition.

Key recommendations

- UK retailers and brands need to acknowledge the deficiencies in the Bangladesh labour law, including its failure to implement ILO Conventions fully. They should collectively put pressure on the Bangladesh Government to review and revise its legal framework for protecting the rights of all workers, including women workers in the RMG sector. Silence by UK retailers and brands whilst continuing to place orders into Bangladesh effectively condones and perpetuates the exploitation of workers in the supply chains which supply them with clothes. Social audits are, at best, a sticking plaster. UK retailers and brands need to engage with the Bangladesh Government so that workers' rights are protected in law and the law is enforced by the Bangladesh Government.
- UK retailers should only source products from and reward suppliers in Bangladesh that have policies and mechanisms in place: to address sexual violence and harassment against women, to deter all forms of physical violence both inside and outside the factory, to prevent discrimination against pregnant women and nursing mothers, to address the underrepresentation of women in management positions and the gender pay gap, and remove barriers to women's access to remedy if their entitlements are not delivered.
- The UK Government should use diplomacy and put pressures on the Bangladesh Government to respect and act on the international commitments it has made under ILO conventions, CEDAW and the SDGs to introduce legislation to promote and protect workers' rights, including women's rights, and to effectively enforce (by adequately resourcing) its employment legislation.
- The UK Government should establish a Garment Trading Adjudicator (GTA) or an independent watchdog to tackle UK retailers' unethical purchasing practices which are a key driver of labour exploitation in international supply chains in the RMG industry.



Aberdeen University Project team: From left to right: Prof M. Azizul Islam, Nglaa Ahmad (a final year sustainability accounting PhD candidate who joined the project team as a research assistant), Prof Pamela Abbott, Solvej Andersen (a final year sociology and anthropology graduate student who joined the team as a research assistant) and Dr Shamima Haque.