



**Exploring the wellbeing of garments workers during  
COVID-19 in connection with the Sustainable Development  
Goals: A study in Savar, Dhaka**

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This report is submitted to Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC) as the outcome of a study that was conducted with research grant from the centre in 2021-2022.

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## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, on behalf of the research team, would like to state that we did not submit this study report for full or partial publishing or presentation anywhere. It has also said that the report is genuine and legitimate and followed all ethical standards to the letter. As a result, I want to make sure that secondary literature and resources and original data are widely acknowledged.

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## ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is set to graduate from the category of “least-developed country” (LDC) in 2026. Bangladesh’s new identity as a developing country signifies its strength and capacity; at the same time, it brings forth new challenges particularly as regards sustainability of the achievements. Bangladesh development journey and efforts to achieve SDGs have taken a significant blow due to the wide impacts of the COVID - 19 pandemic and this question has drawn greater attention as to how the working-class people have been exposed to the crises, and how the state and society have played role to provide support and buffer to the workers who were set to be easily exposed to vulnerability and breakdown.

This study has kept special focus on the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-5), that intends to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. Its objective has to examine the diverse impacts that have unfolded in the lives of garment workers during the health emergency and how they have made life possible in such context. Different methods of qualitative data collection were adopted: researchers went inside the locales where workers live and observed everyday activities of men and women as well as taking note of the ways in which interactions, events and actions unfold. The analysis of life histories and case studies (developed based on key informant interviews) show that deepening of insecurity and precarity is the foremost recurring theme that has featured the lives of the garment workers. In the context of covid, both male and female workers found it hard to cope up with the severe forms of uncertainties and anxieties.

In the course of the study, through the group discussions, interviews and observations, it was revealed that in spite of all extensive and engulfing stresses, the garment workers and their family members did not give up, rather they showed resilience and kept on struggling. Formal support from the state and the factory owners was not adequate in most of the cases. Informal forms of assistance and protection were made available by the kins, neighbors, co-workers and factory owners who played a crucial role in enabling the workers to survive in a situation that appeared overwhelmingly like an unending nightmare. The field data also illustrates that the garment workers of Bangladesh have not been taken adequately on board at the time of conceiving, planning and implementing SSNP and other social protection measures. The social security measures that were available for garment workers were scanty and needed to be significantly extended. There must be specifically tailored Social Safety Net programmes to safeguard the workers from different forms of vulnerabilities and possibilities of slipping downward.

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## List of Abbreviations

BDT	Bangladesh Taka
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters' Association
COVID -19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
DIFE	Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
EOI	Export Oriented Industrialization
FFW	Food for Work
FFE	Food for Education
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FYP	Five Year Plan
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GED	General Economic Division
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
HRM	Human Resource Management
LDC	Least Developed Countries
IDI	In-depth Interview
ISI	Import Substitution Industrialisation
KII	Key Informant Interview
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NEP	New Economic Policy
NIC	Newly Industrialising Countries
NIDL	New International Division of Labour
NILS	New International Labour Studies
NSS	The National Security Strategy
OMS	Open Market Sale
RMG	Ready-made Garments
RMP	Rural Maintenance Programme
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

SSN	Social Safety Net
SSNP	Social Safety Net Program
SSS	Social Security Services
TNC	Transnational Corporations
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VGf	Vulnerable Group Feeding
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development



## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Experts, observers, and commentators have come to agree in recent years that Bangladesh is one of the most promising developing countries in the world (Sawada et al. 2018; Hossain 2017; Mahmud et al. 2018). In fact, the country is set to graduate from the category of “least-developed country” (LDC) in 2026. In 2018 Bangladesh first met all the criteria for graduating from an LDC to a developing country. International development scholars have recently referred to Bangladesh as development ‘surprise’ (Asadullah et al. 2014), and they have talked about the country’s ‘unexpected success’ as well as using the label, ‘Bangladesh Paradox’ (Hossain 2017); many have even termed the achievements as a development ‘miracle’ (Sawada et al. 2018). This is clearly a contrast to the dismal depiction that Bangladesh would evoke decades earlier. In 1970s and ‘80s, the dominant description would generally involve portraying the country rather as ‘a basket case’ (Smith and Keefer 2005) or a ‘Test Case of Development’ (Faaland and Parkinson 1976). The resilient journey of the country has been aptly captured by Amartya Sen when he noted this: “Self-assured commentators who saw Bangladesh as a “basket case” not many years ago could not have expected that the country would jump out of the basket and start sprinting ahead even as expressions of sympathy and pity were pouring in” (Sen 2013: 1966).

Bangladesh’s new identity as a developing country signifies its strength and capacity; at the same time, it brings forth new challenges particularly as regards sustainability of the achievements. To make the development more meaningful for the citizens, more attention and resources must be allocated to improve the lives of the disadvantaged and excluded groups of people. A country that has achieved significant economic and social success cannot ignore the call to focus on the ‘socially excluded’, ‘marginal’ or ‘left behind’ groups of people. To eliminate inequality and deliver welfare to people of diverse backgrounds is a core responsibility of a nation that has achieved the capacity to look beyond the basic questions of building the infrastructure or increasing per capita income. In such a context it becomes an imperative for a developing country to take

specific initiatives to ensure the wellbeing of those who are the main ‘drivers’ of the country’s economic progress: in case of Bangladesh these groups are the farmers, remittance earning labourers, and RMG (ready-made garments) workers.

Bangladesh’s success in achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were praiseworthy; and, it has already been acknowledged that the country has strong commitment and potentials to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set under the auspices of United Nations (UN) (GOB 2018; 2020). The preparatory works have already been completed by the government with a view to mainstreaming and implementing SDGs. The Government has also taken measures to align the SDGs with the national development aspirations reflected in government plans and policies (GOB 2020). As the spirit of SDGs has been taken seriously into account, the government has sketched out policies and programmes to address multidimensional nature of poverty in the country by fostering accelerated, inclusive, and resilient development.

At the heart of SDGs is a ‘whole society’ approach, which means that there is an increased urgency to achieve development in more inclusive and equitable ways. The development journey that is envisioned in the SDGs aspires not only to generate economic growth or increase per capita income, it places greater emphasis on equality, inclusion and sustainability. While institutionalizing the SDGs implementation mechanism and developing the integrated policy framework for the 2030 Agenda, the country has adopted the Second Perspective Plan 2021-2041. Moreover, while finalizing the 8th Five Year Plan (2021-2025), emphasis has been given on ‘leaving no one behind’ and promoting equitable and inclusive growth and development.

In this backdrop, the aim of this study was to examine how the real stakeholders of one of main ‘driving sectors’ of Bangladesh economy – that is, the workers employed in RMG sector – are being affected by (that is, being benefited by or excluded from) the development success and growth. Its intention was to generate understanding as to how the efforts to achieve SDGs are being played out in the everyday lives of the workers – how much of the achievement is being reflected in the actual living condition of the working-class people. To put it precisely, the study tried to understand the ‘alignment’ of SDGs in the real-life settings of the garment workers who are the ‘lifeline’ of the export earnings of the country. The exploration was carried out in the light of the fact

that whereas SDG-8 highlights on ‘decent work’, SDG-5 accentuates gender equality and women empowerment, and SDG-10 is about the agenda of reduced inequality. These goals have direct implication in terms of wellbeing of the garment workers. In the context of covid pandemic the question has drawn greater attention as to how the working-class people have been exposed to the crises, and how the state and society have played role to provide support and buffer to the workers who were set to be easily exposed to vulnerability and breakdown.

Clearly, Bangladesh development journey and efforts to achieve SDGs have taken a significant blow due to the wide impacts of the Covid -19 pandemic. The widespread outbreak of the disease gave rise to significant uncertainties over the growth and development prospects as well as creating deep shocks and uncertainties in everyday life of the people. The workers employed in the garment factories were among those who were ‘hard-hit’ by economic, social and psychological dilemmas unfolding through the unprecedented crisis. In some cases timely intervention by the government provided significant policy and financial support to keep manufacturing and export sector on track; however, the impact of the pandemic in the social lives of the workers brought this reality strongly to the fore that to safeguard the working class people the state and society have to become more cognizant of their vulnerabilities and precarities, and broader policy interventions and stronger social support mechanisms are to be in place to ensure dignified lifeways for the working class men and women – be it at the time of pandemic or be it ‘normal’ time.

### **Problem Statement**

One remarkable aspect of Bangladesh’s recent success is that here development has not remained narrowly focused on economic gains or income earning of the individuals, households or on per capita income and national level growth. Bangladesh’s achievement in terms of social and human development has been particularly noteworthy. An implicit flattering has been found in the ‘background’ and ‘problem statement’ towards the concept of development in Bangladesh. The concept of development has not been critically analysed in line with the discourse of Multidimensional Poverty Index that aims to measure development in broader sense. Development must be judged by its impact on people, not only by changes in their income more generally in terms of their choices, capabilities and freedoms. Gap

analysis has been largely ignored while formulating the background and statement of the problem. The country has invested notably in health, education and social protection related programmes, and efforts have been evident to make ways for the masses to benefit from the fruits of growth and development.

Addressing in-country inequality is the goal set under SDG 10. Bangladesh during its liberation war showed clear commitment to democracy and social justice. To ensure social justice the government must play an effective role particularly to 'protect' the vulnerables, working class, subaltern, excluded and marginal people from the possibilities of being further harmed or being exposed to threats, risks and hazards. As multidimensional Poverty Index stresses, the development of a country or society must be judged by its impact on people, specifically in terms of expansion of their choices, capabilities and freedoms. It is in this spirit that different mixtures of 'welfare regimes' must be there to ensure state's safeguard for the deserving ones by the way of providing 'social protection'.

Social protection is not only limited to specific safety net programmes that target the most marginal or excluded one. Even those members of the citizenry who have become part of the market or capitalist production system might not be adequately safeguarded against the shocks, crises or precarities. In fact, social protection and support is needed to ensure that the possibility of sliding down can be arrested in case of those who have made good progress in terms of income and other considerations. Therefore, in case of garment workers, the state and society have the duty to see if they are sustainably 'graduated' from a situation in which the threats and risks were great.

### **Research Objectives**

By reflecting on the economic and social processes through which Bangladesh has made its gains on gender equality and women's empowerment, this study **has attempted** to generate understanding as to how inclusive policies have so far been implemented. It also analyses the prospects for the achievement of the SDGs, with their stronger emphasis on inclusion, equality, and "leaving no one behind".

The study has kept special focus on the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-5) that intends to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. Focus has been on the point that the SDGs have incorporated growing understanding

of gender disparities, and women's empowerment has been recognized as a much important contributing factor toward development.

*Specific objectives* of the study have been -

- a. To explore the pattern of vulnerabilities and precarities that featured the everyday life of garment workers, particularly in the context of covid pandemic.
- b. To examine the diverse impacts that have unfolded in the lives of garment workers during the health emergency and how they have made life possible in such context, with support or absence of support from the state and society.
- c. To enquire if the garment workers narratives at time of COVID-19 show that the SDGs' focus on gender equality and 'leaving no one behind' is being practiced and implemented in the context of Bangladesh RMG sector, especially in connection to the covid pandemic.
- d. To investigate how the 'democratization' of social space and reform of social institutions can contribute to making the social protection intervention more effective for increased wellbeing of Bangladesh's garment workers.

### **Rationale**

By taking the impacts of the pandemic particularly into account, this study has focused on the policy strength and challenges as regards achieving SDGs in the time of the pandemic with particular focus on garment workers. It has specifically investigated the challenges the pandemic has brought about in terms of some of the core themes of SDGs: women empowerment, in-country equality (reducing inequality within the country), decent work and 'not leaving anyone behind'.

The study has therefore remained particularly focused to these questions: What are the ways in which Bangladesh RMG workers are impacted in the context of achieving SDGs in the time of COVID-19? What is the meaning of this impact in terms of workers' wellbeing and achieving SDG? How do the policies and other efforts of the government, factory owners and other stakeholders play role in providing support to the workers? What are the social and cultural ways in which workers' agency, sufferings or resilience can be understood?

The study contributes to bringing about grounded knowledge about the challenges that garment workers face in a time when growth and development at national level experience significant challenges. As it has deeply investigated the crises, tensions as well as aspirations, hopes, strengths and innovations of the workers, its findings are likely to pave way toward better understanding of the social and cultural landscape with regards to the wellbeing of the working-class people in Bangladesh in the context of current pandemic.

### **1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study**

The study will contribute to and complement the government and UN generated policy discourses on achieving SDGs and coping with pandemic. Whereas attention is generally drawn to wage issues or factory work environment while talking about the ‘problems’ of garment workers, this research tries to widen the focus by shedding light on human aspects of workers lives. Thus, one of its expected contributions is to widen ‘the labour welfare agenda’ that Bangladesh state and society currently can imagine. It complements the national or macro level understanding on SDGs’ achievement by bringing about micro-level understandings. By closely documenting the lives of the male and female workers in their living arrangements in Ashulia area of Dhaka district, it brings forth insights about the real-life challenges and innovations that feature the mundane life of the workers.

### **1.6 Organization of the Report**

This research report is divided into five chapters. The first chapter has described the research problems, background, research questions, and objectives of the study. The second chapter deals with the literature review for an in-depth understanding of the concepts and problems of the research. The third chapter demonstrates the methodology of the study. The fourth chapter has incorporated the data presentation and discussion. The last chapter focuses on conclusion and recommendation.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In this chapter we review literature that deals with some major themes that this research deals with. First, we have briefly reviewed selected parts of the vast literature that has dealt with the question on how to approach and explain the lives of garment workers of the Global South. By explaining the global context of emergence of export-oriented factories in the context of developing countries, the literature makes clear effort to locate the working-class people within the global network of capitalist production. Then we review the discourses and practices that are related with the welfare regime (particularly, social safety net programmes) that is currently in force in Bangladesh. After that we review the literature that deals with social impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.

These three strands of literature help us to frame our understanding as to how the garment workers of Bangladesh are located within global capitalism and Bangladesh state and society, and how their situation became particularly stressed at the time of covid. By drawing insights from these three strands, we relate the essence of literature to the realities that we narrate in the next chapter. The literature review thus helps us to have deeper understanding as to what Bangladesh's state and society might do in terms of public policy in order to achieve sustainable development goals, particularly by paying extended attention to its urban workforce.

#### **2.1 Approaching the Life of the Garment Workers: Relevant theoretical and conceptual debates**

It is important to understand the global history that created the context of export-oriented production regimes in the developing countries. To understand the context and transnational 'location' of the RMG sector of Bangladesh, it is important to see how it has got its roots within the historical transformation process of capitalism at global level.

##### ***Capitalism and export-oriented garment sector in developing countries***

A series of successive world recessions since the 1970s gave rise to new flexible accumulation strategies which, consequently, led to the radical reorganization of

production forms and spaces. One of the most significant effects of such restructuring was the production of an international female industrial labour force, often referred to as the process of 'feminization of labour' (Standing 1999, Ong 1991). It has been noted that in an intensely competitive global market, particularly in the labour-intensive stages of the production process, one of the strategies for survival has been the 'primitive' exploitation of labour: *the extraction of maximum possible labour at minimum possible costs* (Elson 1995, Marchand & Runyan 2000, Nash & Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Rothstein & Blim 1992). Such labour has mainly been 'female' since 'women's disadvantages' have 'comparative advantage' in the labour market (Arizpe and Aranda 1981).

Economic and social policies such as 'New Economic Policy' (NEP), 'Structural Adjustment Programmes' (SAP), and others have also been brought under focus and scrutinized with an understanding that such policy shifts have played key role in producing 'new' order of capital, labour and production. Such dissatisfaction with older concepts and the search for newer ones is an expression of the fact that the state of play on the ground is quite messy and changing – proper conceptualization of which is deeply challenging.

After briefly reviewing these wider spectrums of concepts that locate apparel industries of Global South in terms of and in relation to transnational structure of capitalist production and labour, we will reflect on what implication this location has for the living conditions and livelihoods of female workers.

'New International Division of Labour' (NIDL) thesis is one of the prominent theoretical frameworks that focused on fundamental structural changes that occurred in the political economy of capitalist countries from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. According to this perspective, it was a time when the rate of profit began to fall in industrialised countries and necessitated a further phase of international restructuring of capital, a process that included intensification of international relocation of manufacturing production to the industrialising countries (Armstrong, Glyn and Harrison 1991). This relocation of manufacturing was done with an aim to 'appropriate' the plentiful cheaper labour available in the Third World.



As a perspective, NIDL is linked to the neo-Marxist ‘dependency’ theoretical model which in the late 1960’s and 1970’s provided a dominant model for understanding the capitalist restructuring processes. In ‘dependency’ model it was argued that development of advanced economies was contingent on the underdevelopment or backwardness of dependent capitalist countries (Frank 1978; Leys 1977; Wallerstein 1979). The recipients of the world’s manufacturing industries were seen as emerging from being low-wage agricultural producers to becoming the newly industrialising countries (NICs). New division of labour was, thus, viewed largely to be an outcome of the profit-seeking strategies of transnational corporations (TNCs) in a period of crisis where they were guided by the structural logic of accumulation on a global scale (Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1980; De Jenvry and Garramon 1977; Frank 1978).

Many analysts proceeded further and related this phase of capitalist development to the shifts that started to take place from far earlier on. For them, it was after ‘decolonization’ and emergence of newly independent countries around the World War II that the industrial West had to look for a new way of ‘global social engineering’. What happened in the early 1970s must be understood in relation to the form that capitalist global order had taken in the late 1940s. That was the time – the years at the end of World War II – when capitalist centre felt the utmost necessity to innovate new strategies to ensure dominance within the newer global order. Whereas in colonial period the international division of labour was an outcome of direct colonial rule and politics in colonized regions, after decolonization the main instruments for indirect colonial rule of rich capitalist states over the poor countries were the international division of labour and politics of ‘free trade’. Mechanisms of investment, aid and credit were similarly instrumental in providing this base. What happened in the 1970s was thus a “newer” phase of the order that unfolded after World War II.

The perspective that conceptualizes new restructuring of the late 1960s and early 1970s because of “crisis of Fordism” is not a completely different perspective compared to NIDL thesis – it rather is complimentary in nature to the thesis. The core argument here is: the Fordist-Keynesian system that was serving well for a certain period immediately after World War II gradually reached saturation and failed to provide the impetus that global capitalism needed badly – this necessitated search for new system of production organization. Fordism and Keynesianism governed European and North American

markets in 1950s and 1960s and was characterized by dominance of small number of integrated corporations (MNCs) producing high volumes of standardized goods depending on 'economics of scale' and 'routinization of production process' (Reich 1983; Storper and Scott 1990) that kept the production cost of the farms low and enabled the farms to provide better real wages (Storper and Scott 1990).

Fordist-Keynsian way of capitalist production was supported and strengthened by several factors relating to geo-politics of the time. US investments in Europe after World War II under the Marshall Plan provided opportunities for the US corporations to invest surplus capital in Europe. Moreover, the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 turned the dollar into the world's reserve currency, U.S. became the world's banker, and large American corporations were in position to make the best of world's commodity and capital market. Altogether, U.S. government policies enjoyed a 'hegemonic' status in guiding world's economic growth and international development. Consequently, U.S. corporations expanded to an unprecedented extent.

By mid 1960s as Japan and Western Europe completed their economic recoveries, markets there became saturated, and producers in these areas started to look to export their products and capital to other areas to absorb their own surplus productive capacity. It was the first time since World War II that surplus production capacity became a problem. Some other 'developments' took place at this stage that made total restructuring of capitalist order quite inevitable. Severe world recession of 1970s came later; however, in the meantime, Latin American nations strengthened import substitution policies and competition from Japanese multinationals coupled with the world recessions forced American and European multinational corporations to shift their production to poor countries that offered competitive/low wage rates (Appelbaum and Henderson 1992, Lim 1983; Nash 1983).

In their own settings MNCs started to face various problems that included increased production capacity being arrested by the saturation of world demand. Whereas the system was based on the premise that there would be a stable and expanding demand for mass-produced manufactured goods, these newly uncertain demand conditions caused enormous stiffness within the system. Attempts of the corporations to introduce more flexible job categories and work arrangements faced strong opposition from labour

unions. This is how the Fordist-Keynesian system fell into serious crisis, which was punctuated by oil-price shocks and inflationary waves of the early 1970's, and the bitter labour struggles of the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Thus, it was amid this crisis from the early- and mid- 1970's that the global capitalist production system went through a significant wave of reorganization and restructuring. The exodus of manufacturing to low-wage areas and the success of the East Asian 'Newly Industrializing countries' (NICs) convinced governments in the developing countries to pursue a strategy that encourages global producers to make use of their cheap labour and resources (Frobel et. al. 1980; Sessen 1988). Advancement of communications and transportation technologies has had a tremendous impact on the global economy at this stage. These advances, as well as advances in programmable manufacturing equipment, have accelerated the trends initiated by the post-1970s crisis in profitability.

Global level restructuring of capitalist production that thus unfolded was clearly based on New International Division of Labour (NIDL) and gave rise to a new global integration of which one central feature was fragmentation of manufacturing activities into a number of steps dispersed to different industrial sites throughout the world. Advances in telecommunications and computer technology allowed producers to coordinate and integrate production, distribution, and management on a global scale (Castells and Henderson 1987, Frobel et. al. 1980). Many have argued that a strategy of 'de-skilling' and 'de-linking' is at the foundation of NIDL-based new integration (e.g., Frobel et. al. 1980; Lipietz 1985). According to Castells and Henderson (1987), electronic networks now work as high-speed superhighways, and connect designers, retailers, financiers, and assembly line managers into globally dispersed production units. Moreover, programmable electronic tools and automated production allows parts to be perfectly standardized, which means that different parts can be fabricated and assembled at distant locations. Technology and skill intensive activities therefore can be de-linked geographically from labour-intensive activities, taking advantage of the best factor conditions around the globe (Frobel et. al. 1980). Producers are able to control labour and reduce labour costs by the fragmentation and de-skilling of labour processes.

In such a situation, national governments gradually placed much confidence on the policy of Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI) which played big role in boosting up global capitalism's ventures of profit making by taking advantage of cheap labours. Over the years governments of developing countries also stepped up to create export processing zones (EPZs) and offered tax incentive, guarantees against union activity, and infrastructural improvements to lure labour intensive activities to EPZs. In some cases, governments even offered subsidize cheap labour through food and housing subsidies, the devaluation of local currency, and wage ceilings (Bello and Rsenfield 1990).

Another feature of labour-intensive, light consumer goods manufacturing (such as apparel, footwear, toys, and consumer electronic) is that global integration tends to take place through vertically disintegrated subcontracting networks organized by large buyers. Many firms who have become famous for their brand names do not take part directly in manufacturing activities, they focus only on design, marketing and retailing. Such 'manufacturers without factories' contract out all production activities to networks of subcontractors (Gereffi, and Korzeniewicz 1994).

Thus, the factories located in the developing countries basically work as "world market" factories that are owned by local capitalists or are subsidiaries of multinational corporations. In either case they are integrally tied into a global or transnational system of production. They are mainly convenient sites to produce goods for which designs, raw materials and marketing are all controlled externally (Siddiqi 1996: 20). Elson and Pearson (1981) notes:

Some world market factories producing final consumer goods do no more than assemble together parts supplied by their customers. For instance, trousers are cut in Germany, then flown in air-containers to Tunisia, where they are sewn together, packed and flown back for sale in Germany. In such cases, the world market factory is fully integrated into the production process of the customer firm, even though in formal terms it may be independent (p. 88).

Overall, the strategy of global integration results in a geographically dispersed and functionally integrated global factory. This is made possible by the abundance of cheap labour in the Third World, advances in telecommunications and transportation

technology, and the creation of export processing zones by cash starved governments in the Third World. The presence of large pools of unskilled, vulnerable, mostly female labourers in developing countries emerges as one of the most vital forces that makes restructuring and new global integration a viable strategy (Froebel et. al. 1980; Elson and Pearson 1980).

### *Capitalist Production regime and labour relations*

The literature that we have reviewed in the preceding sections deals mostly with the organization of capitalism as a ‘production system’, and the approaches outlined above are linked basically to NIDL thesis that focuses on global geography of production. The focus here is particularly on the process of relocation of industries from the first world to the third world. The cornerstone of such conceptualisation is the proposition that transnational corporations are major vehicles of global capitalism that process prodigious economic power.

However, such approaches are inadequate in many ways as they fail to focus on labour relations in the factories as well as social and political transformations that occur at national or sub-national levels. Most glaring failure of these perspectives is that whereas processes of transformations that are complex, varied and localized, they view them to be linear and uniform ones. Since the production process is conceived in a mechanistic way, the analysis of capitalistic development in the developing countries remains confined to the ‘level of appearance’ (Rock 2002: 14). Policies taken “to promote exports or attract foreign investment [...] are seen as a result of the ‘needs’ of capital at the centre, rather than as an outcome of local class struggle” (Jenkins 1984: 34). Consequently, in most of the cases such perspectives make reference only to economic growth, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and industrial productivity, and no sustained attempt is made to infiltrate the ‘surface manifestations’ in order to unearth the social and cultural consequences that working class experiences and embodies in the process. From such perspectives it is unlikely to focus beyond production arrangement; deeper look into labour relations, class configurations or labour struggles and movements remains improbable.

New International Labour Studies (NILS) as a perspective puts focus on understanding the consequences that economic globalisation produces on the forms of labour control

and union formation (Kuruville 1995; Cohen 1991; Munck 1988). While trying to participate in the reorganized global economy, newly industrialising countries were trying to adopt ‘outward-oriented’ policies – a shift from ‘inward-oriented’ import substitution industrialisation (ISI) to export oriented industrialisation (EOI) (Hamilton 1983; Jenkins 1991). EOI was not superior to ISI in itself. The shift rather exemplified “the ability of the state to direct the accumulation process in the direction ... required by capitalist development at particular points in time” (Jenkins 1991: 224). Many (e.g., Munck 1998) have argued that when EOI was blooming in full in many of the industrialising regions, an associated rise of authoritarian regimes played an active role in suppressing organised labour and subjected workers to ‘archaic’ forms of labour control.

However, both NISL and NIDL – the perspectives reviewed above – have been criticised for being inclined to incorporate a ‘narrow view’. Since the perspectives are too occupied about the geographical relocation and rationalisation of capitalist production, and the repression of labour, this literature fails to highlight the ways in which the specific demands of overseas markets have shaped the social relations, local power structure, gendered practices or other aspects of local society and culture.

### *Toward understanding workers’ agency and resistance*

The approaches fail to adequately address either the part played by the working class as important agents in the broader processes of social and cultural shift or the way they negotiate and experience the impact of the shift in their own lives. Workers are generally depicted as the victims of structural processes which are beyond their control. Industrialisation under global integration is generally viewed as ‘inimical’ to the interests of labour – consequently, focus is given generally on disempowerment of the working class and not much attention is paid to any possibility of empowerment. Third World workers are thus relegated to the level of mere ‘objects’ of the expansion of capitalism; the notion of ‘subjectivity’, ‘agency’, ‘class struggle’ or ‘forms of resistance’ remain essentially ignored; possibility of perceiving workers as a social force or agent of history remains eluded.

Moreover, as Bryan (1995) observes, to label this phase of restructuring as something distinct or as a ‘new era’ of capitalism seems “both to foreclose debate about the nature

of change, and to impose the interpretation that change occurs by quantum leaps” (p. 12). The fundamental nature of change, in Marxist terms, cannot be measured in a linear sense. It needs to be understood in an organic sense – characterised by continuities and discontinuities – and as reflecting the extension of capitalist class relations.

Whereas the two main perspectives securitized above focus mainly on capitalist production mechanism and organization of labour, both of the positions basically view the process as being imposed upon from the centre. The way people in the ‘periphery’ or in developing world ‘localize’ the process and the ways national or sub-national systems and structures intersect with the transnational ones do not come to feature discussions carried out within such frameworks. That is why I will extend this review further to see how other strands of analysis – such as viewing the process more as globalization or neoliberalism – shed light on this all-encompassing shift, and its effects on lives of women workers in the Global South.

***Focus on transnational process better: Corporate globalization, neoliberal transformation and state of workers in the global South***

Conceptualizing the process of transformation as “corporate globalization” might be helpful to overcome the limitations that both NIDL and NISL perspectives involve. Focus on globalisation or corporate globalisation widens the analytical framework in the sense that it brings complex natures and forms of changes at both micro and macro levels to the fore and highlights the necessity of examining how trans-border and transnational exchanges of technology, innovation, knowledge, trade, ideas and communication take place in diverse sites and heterogeneous ways.

There have been efforts to view globalization as synonymous to “internationalisation”, “liberalisation”, “universalization”, and “westernization”. However, Scholte (2000) argues that such concepts may not be adequate to comprehend the nature of spread of globalization beyond borders. “Supraterritoriality” or “deterritorialization” are the notions that he proposes to capture economic and ideological features of globalization. Appadurai (1996) also uses the term “deterritorialization” which suggests that globalization replaces territorial regulations with extraterritorial deregulation. It also brings to light how an ideological “outsourcing” of capitalist world order takes place along with economic one.

To understand what corporate globalisation particularly means for the workers in the developing countries, many (Mohiuddin 2004) have employed the concept *maquiladora syndrome*. Maquiladora factories of the United States and Mexico border towns are seen to typify how the advantage of low-wage Mexican labour is exploited. One characteristic feature of the factories developed with *maquiladora syndrome* is that these factories affect peasantry and agrarian livelihood of the respective target countries in a more or less similar manner. The sector depends on the regular supply of a large workforce from rural agricultural households (Ross 1997). Another feature of the *maquiladora syndrome* is that the countries that entertain the garment sweatshops undergo relatively similar experiences of a vicious cycle of destruction of their indigenous economies (Beneria 1992).

However, whereas perspectives of “globalisation” or “glocalisation” proves to be quite useful in engendering broader viewpoint in many cases, it’s important to bear in mind that many have found the concept to be fussy and disoriented in understanding factory work and workers lives in the margin as it has been used to denote and explain so many things. To overcome this fussiness and to have a standpoint, precise and updated in nature, many analysts have resorted to concepts “neoliberal economic globalization” or “neoliberalism” itself. Many have used the term “Neoliberal phase of globalization” (Jaggar 2001).

### ***The process of neoliberalization and the workers of Global South***

Analysis of neoliberalism vis-à-vis production and labour processes is keen to accentuate the “insecurities” and “uncertainties” that are brought about for the working class by this economic and political ideology (that is, neoliberalism) and concomitant practices. In fact, “neoliberalism” is a term that has become popular in more recent time – within anthropology it has gained popularity particularly in past one decade. It is argued that, the concept has the ability to grasp the consequences of late developments such as structural adjustment programme (SAP) or new economic policy (NEP). For many it is a more apt alternative to the concept of “late capitalism”: focusing on “late capitalism” means focusing on new restructuring of capitalism that we have reviewed in the preceding paragraphs.



Ganti (2014) presents a detailed review of the concept “neoliberalism” within anthropological scholarship and examines current anthropological engagements with it as an analytical frame and historical process. According to her, anthropologists have most commonly understood neoliberalism in two main ways: as a structural force that affects people’s life-chances and as an ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities. It also functions frequently as an index of the global political-economic order.

Within anthropological literature neoliberalism denotes a wide array of political contexts and socioeconomic phenomena: structural adjustment policies in the Global South; post-socialist transformations in Eurasia; the retrenchment of the welfare state in Western democracies; the production of selves and subjectivities; the ways in that culture and cultural difference are commodified to accrue profit (Ganti 2014).

Although initially coined to signal ideological distance from classical liberalism, in contemporary scholarship the term “neoliberalism” is ideologically and theoretically charged and most commonly employed in critique of existing capitalist political-economic structures, modes of governance, discourses valorising individual entrepreneurialism, or efforts to retrench the state’s redistributive role (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, Bourdieu 1998, Harvey 2005, Ortner 2011). Thus, engaging with “neoliberalism” entails not only the examination of a particular phase of capitalism as mechanism of production or consumerism, it also underlines the importance of investigating global and local processes relating to state-market relationship, privatisation, governmentality, entrepreneurship, working of development discourse, or civil society’s role playing. Harvey (2005) famously argued that neoliberalism is a class-based project that seeks to restore the power of economic elites. It is in line with this argument that, Ganti (2014) shows, general conclusions that most anthropological studies on neoliberalism reaches include: “global inequalities have risen sharply”; “most people are marginalized, dispossessed, and disenfranchised as public resources have been privatized”; “cities increasingly are gentrified”; “social welfare programmes are reduced or slashed”; and “the rural and urban poor have been incorporated into market economies in adverse way”.

Along with investigating the material effects of neoliberal policies, anthropologists have also examined the strategies people develop to cope with them. They have looked into the ways in which neoliberal policies have reshaped politics and ideas about citizenship at the local, grassroots, and community levels, often in unexpected ways (Kalb 2009, Lukose 2005, Shakow 2011).

However, there is strong scepticisms about the validity of neoliberalism as an analytical framework. Schwegler (2009) opines: “Perhaps neoliberalism has been a little *too* convenient, it has become a handy way to bracket the global political economy without actively engaging it” (p. 24). Ferguson (2009) argues that too often neoliberalism has become a “sloppy synonym for capitalism” (p. 171). Others insist that ethnographic particularities and local categories and meanings are erased when everything is subsumed under the framework of neoliberalism (Gershon 2011; Kipnis 2008; Nonini 2008). However, despite such criticism and unease, the framework of analysing neoliberalism still remains a compelling framework for anthropologists and other social scientists who want to understand changes in lives and living conditions of people in contemporary world.

Thus, the perspectives on NILDL, NISL, “capitalist restructuring”, corporate globalisation, neoliberalism, and others have competed so far to systematically theorize industrialisation and labour market – though not all the perspectives have been successful in putting workers and their lives at the centre. In the section below I will focus on how theorization of late capitalism/ globalization/ neoliberalism engages with the lives of female workers in the developing countries. It is in the same vein that the question of “exploitation of women’s cheap labour” as well as concepts such as “feminisation of labour” and “sweatshop production” would be examined with a view to understand lives of female factory workers.

***Giving closer look: Understanding the convergence of labour and gender inequalities***

As the discussion above shows it clearly, the factories in the developing countries are exclusively integrated into a global system of production and are conditioned by transnational order while national or sub-national level laws, policies and structures also significantly shape the production and labour regimes that are in operation in particular sites. While trying to explain how production and labour is organized in such

factories, scholars take interest in two striking issues: *one*, these factories are by and large ‘temporary’ in nature as the labour-intensive structure of production could easily be shifted to potentially cheaper locations – thus, implying the fact that employment of the workers were always tenuous and unreliable; *two*, the composition of the workforce is overwhelmingly young women – the women being employed mainly as low-level, unskilled operatives while managerial and administrative posts are held primarily by men. Women tend to comprise the lower paid half of the total industrial labour force in developing countries. Thus, a central concern of earlier scholars was to investigate the reasons underlying the large-scale feminization of the industrial labour force (Chapkis and Enloe 1983; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Mitter 1986; Elson and Pearson 1980).

The context of ‘feminisation of labour’ is aptly summarized by Ong (1991) in the following way:

... Since the early 1970s, mixed systems based on free-trade zones, subcontracting firms, and sweatshops have come to typify industrialization in Asia, Central America, and elsewhere. [...] [T]he current mix of mass production, subcontracting, and family-type farms represents a new regime of accumulation worldwide. Since the 1973 world recession, new patterns of "flexible accumulation" ... have come into play as corporations struggle in an increasingly competitive global arena. Flexible labor regimes, based primarily on female and minority workers, are now common in the Third World, as well as in poor regions of metropolitan countries.

Many analysts, whose work we are going to briefly review below, have shown that focus on gender and gender inequality offers a productive strategy for analysing globalizing processes and their local variations and contestations. Along with examining how capitalist exploitation and gender hierarchy support each other, attention can also be given to multiple dimensions including gendered patterns of labour recruitment and discipline, the transnational mobility and commodification of reproductive labour, and the gendered effects of international structural adjustment programs, among others.

The integration of women into the industrial workforce is largely a function of capital’s impulse to expand surplus value. Joekes (1987) notes it quite impeccably:

“Industrialization in the post-war period has been as much female led as export led”. In fact, there is a consensus among the analysts that new phase of industrialisation – particularly the phase that is associated with shift from ISI to EOI – is based on increasing employment of women labourer. The creation of special industrial estates or EPZs accelerated this process. Most of the workers in EPZs are women, especially in labour-intensive textile and garment sector; and, most women are shop floor operators or homeworkers, whereas foremen, technicians, supervisors are all men.

Explanations as to why wages for women are lower than for men have got resemblance worldwide – it resonates with themes found in European literature on industrialisation. In fact, the image of the ‘docile’, ‘nimble-fingered’ and ‘patient’ women workers thrives in discourses on industrial workers everywhere. Preference for women workers in certain industries is justified by citing women’s relative lack of militancy, their naturally “docile” characters as well as the cheapness of their labour. Women’s apparent social position as primarily wives and mothers, and therefore as secondary wage earners, in addition to social construction of their “natural” ability to tolerate monotonous work requiring patience rather than skill, is routinely cited as a justification for a segmented labour market.

Two contrasting views emerge in the early literature on women’s work in world market factories. There were those who believed in the power of capitalism to emancipate women from the shackles of feudal patriarchy (e.g., Lim 1983) and others who criticised industrial employment as a means for the intensification of existing modes of subordination (Mitter 1986; Chapkins and Enloe 1983).

Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson use the concept of ‘super exploitation’ in their very famous work *'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers': An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing* to describe and explain the ability of capital to lower the female wage (Elson and Pearson 1981). They argue that women “are particularly vulnerable to super-exploitation, in the sense that their wages will not need to cover the full money costs of the reproduction of their labour power, either on a daily or a generational basis”. They also assert that super exploitation refers to the fact that the wages paid to women in some areas are too low to cover the worker’s daily costs (1981: 22-23). They also argue that women constitute a reserve army of labour in

the sense that they can be “hired and fired when needed” (p. 21). Lim (1978) shows in case of factory workers of Malaysia that women are ‘shed’ from the workforce when they marry or have children, allowing the firm to take on cheaper labour on probation wages (p. 359).

Thus, the picture that emerge is that women are in the secondary or subordinated labour market characterised by lower wages, worse working conditions, and less job security. But how to explain the supposed ‘greater docility’ of women workers? In literature we can trace a number of ways in which the question has been dealt with. Whereas Elson and Pearson (1980) stress that such differences between men and women are due to socialisation rather than to nature, Ong (1987) stresses that socialisation takes place in the workplace – not through traditional ideology but through the modern ideologies of femininity.

While most scholars emphasize labour- or export-intensity, Guy Standing (1989) asserts that the increased demand for “flexible labour” – labour that can be easily hired and fired – has led to global feminization. The demand for flexible labour is, we have noted above, a result of changing technology, which allows employers both to utilize more unskilled and semi-skilled workers and to reduce their reliance on full-time and permanent workers, hence lowering unit labour costs and increasing their edge in a competitive global economy. Since employers assume that women have higher turnover rates and will generally work for less pay, women have become the workers of choice.

As the foregoing review of literature shows it clearly that the process of women coming out of the domestic arena and then joining the factories has not happened in an unconnected way, we can see that to understand the lives of the workers we have to remain fully aware about the political economy of capitalist production in the globally organized local firms. It is in this context that it becomes clear: workers’ welfare has to be related to the ways in which state and society take their marginality and well-being into account – mere dependence on market for ensuring ‘labour welfare’ might not be adequate. To understand the ways in which local or national level policies and practices intersect with the transnational process is also important.

## **2.2 Social Protection and Social Safety Net Programmes in Bangladesh**

Social Safety Net (SSN) means any intervention or assistance that helps to improve the lives of families or individuals who are living in poverty or destitution, who are marginal and excluded in the society and who are at risk of sliding down the poverty line. This refers to those public measures that are taken up by a state or society to protect its citizens or members from various forms of social and economic hardship. As Besley et al. (2003) has noted, Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNP) are those public social service interventions that are designed to serve two main functions: (i) redistribution of resources to the poorest members of society; and (ii) greater opportunities to reduce unforeseen risks to individuals (Besley et al., 2003).

Thus, the main purpose of such safety or protection measures is to help a beneficiary or target group of citizenries to sustain a particular kind of shock or risk. By implementing several targeted social safety net programs (SSNPs) at the same time, a government tries to address various forms of risks and vulnerabilities and reduce poverty by directly transferring resources to the poor. SSNPs may consist of both contributory and non-contributory programmes.

‘Social Safety’ and ‘social protection’ are the terms that were much popularized in the 1990s especially through their increased usage by the World Bank and its associated agencies. Institutional reform, poverty reduction, feasibility of adjustment programs were the core concerns for which SSN was used initially. The importance of the programmes has got increased attention in the context of the nations’ efforts to achieve the SDGs. As one of the central goals of SDG is to eradicate poverty, various types of safety net programmes such as cash/in kind transfer, incentive schemes etc. are being used worldwide to fight against impoverishment.

SSNPs programs in Bangladesh are mostly publicly provided. Nevertheless, there are also private SSNs that include inter household transfers, personal holy donations, personal donations to NGOs, community support arrangements, along with the other type of charity. As it has been noted, among others, by Hossain and Osman (2007) and Mallik (2017), social safety net initiatives in Bangladesh have historically been associated with natural shocks, disasters, food crisis (that have caused disruption in production) and structurally determined poverty. From the period immediately after the

independence of Bangladesh in 1971 to the famine of 1974, huge relief and rehabilitation programs were undertaken with the support of foreign aid (Clunies-Ross & Huq 2013).

Starting from the 1974 famine until the floods in the 1980s, safety net programs were based on only public works and other food aid programs supported by different foreign agencies (Malik 2018). During late 1970s and throughout 1980s, Bangladesh Government implemented some social protection initiatives within the purview of Five Years Plans. Some programmes specifically focusing on the unemployment problem were also initiated during this period. Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Food for Work (FFW), Rural Maintenance Program (RMP), and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) were the flagship programmes that were put into work during this period. The 100-days 'Employment Generation Programme' was an addition that came into operation in later period.

Until the mid-1990s, there were only a few programmes of such nature and most of them were designed with a view to provide income support. However, starting from the second half of the 1990s, new – and, to some extent, innovative – programmes have been in offer almost in every year. Different food-based programmes such 'School Stipend' and 'Food for Education' programmes were initiated with an understanding to address the poverty in the lifecycle of the impoverished people. Then the cash-based programmes were unfolded which included allowance for the elderly people (1998) and for the people with disabilities. Allowance for the widows was introduced in the same vein. In the mid-2000s there was geographically specific programme basically targeting the 'monga' or seasonal famine that would take place in the Northern part of the country.

Prolonged floods that took place in the late 1980s and 1990s made an impact on the ways government conceptualized its welfare intervention. Particularly since 1998, the government introduced programmes such as 'Guccho Gram' and 'Asrayan Prokolpo' that included housing support and food relief programmes aiming at the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable and marginal people. The food price hike of taking place during 2007-2008 period made another major impact and interventions such as Open Market Sale (OMS) were introduced.

As Sarwar (2021) has noted, SSNPs in Bangladesh have evolved over the years depending on needs and circumstances. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2015 laid the foundation of the lifecycle approach which brings in a long-term vision in terms of implementing the SSNPs. This approach is a significant move away from relief-based or hand-out approach and gives attention to various stages or life cycle of a targeted household with a view to mitigate lifecycle risks. This approach is more strategic about poverty eradication as it ensures that a ‘graduating’ household does not slip back into poverty.

In the year of 2019, government of Bangladesh allocated a budget of BDT 642 billion, which is equivalent to 2.5% of national GDP to for a wide range of social programs<sup>i</sup> and BDT 352 billion from this share has been used to implement safety net programs. In fiscal year 2021-22, Bangladesh allocated 17.32 percent of total budget for social safety net programs (SNNPs)<sup>ii</sup>. In the fiscal year 2022-23, total allocation for SSNPs was Tk 113,576 crore, up from the previous fiscal year's Tk 107,614 crore. This allocation is 16.75 percent of the total budget and 2.55 percent of the gross domestic product. These programs included cash allowances for elderly, widow, destitute and deserted women, conditional and unconditional transfer, public workers including employment generation program for the poorest and food for work for money and test relief, health and education incentives for poor and vulnerable households, and humanitarian relief with an aim to tackle poverty and acquire human capital.

Overall, the SSN programmes of Bangladesh consist of following:

- 1) Cash transfers: Cash transfer programs include the provision of assistance in the form of cash to the poor. In Bangladesh, common cash transfer programs are Old Age Allowances, Allowance for Widowed, Deserted and Destitute Women, Allowance for Retard/Disable Person, Primary Education Stipend Project, Female

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/04/29/social-safety-nets-in-bangladesh-help-reduce-poverty-and-improve-human-capital>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/redesigning-social-safety-net-programmes-to-mitigate-covid-19-impacts-1628610585>



Secondary School Assistance Program Honorarium Program for the Insolvent Freedom Fighters, and others.

- 2) In-kind transfer: The main in-kind transfers programs in Bangladesh include food and other food-based programs such as vulnerable group feeding (VGF) program, Food for Works, vulnerable group development (VGD), Test relief (TR), food for work, community nutrition program, and Gratuitous Relief.
- 3) Subsidy on prices: subsidy for fertilizer and electricity, subsidy for marginal farmer to cope with fuel price hike, and food subsidy like Open Market Sale (OMS).
- 4) Labour-intensive public works: 100 days Employment Generation Program, Rural Employment Opportunities for Public Assets and others.
- 5) Fee waivers: health card, free schooling at primary and secondary level.
- 6) Other Special programs: Microcredit for Women Self-employment, Housing for the homeless, rehabilitation program for beggars and alternative employment project for baggers.

However, despite the long history of social protection intervention, the system remains fragmented and susceptible to criticism and drawbacks (e.g., Hebbbar et al. 2020). Khuda (2011) categorized the SSNPs of Bangladesh in four groups: allowance for unprivileged section of the population, employment generation through programs like microcredit, food insecurity-based activities to manage natural disasters, and provision of health, education, and training to make population independent. By reviewing these programs rigorously, he further made two subcategories from these four types depending on the mode of payment: food transfer and cash transfer.

Like Khuda (2011), Malik (2018) made her review based on secondary analysis. While sharing findings from various studies, she showed evidence that corruption, nepotism, lack of transparency and digital data, inclusion/exclusion errors, influence of the political people make beneficiary selection process inefficient. Sifat (2020) also has identified some weaknesses of social safety net programmes as he has argued that SSNPs need to be more cognizant of regional disparity in the country as well as giving more attention to urban poverty. This review also highlights how many of the recipients of the supports face different types of harassment in the selection process and in getting

the service. Lack of coordination between the various implementing organizations, departments, and ministries was also highlighted.

Before the pandemic, most of the authors and analysts who reviewed safety net activities basically focused on the progress or challenges of implementation of social safety nets and gave suggestions to policy makers to shed light on such issues. However, during and after Covid, commentaries have started to focus on redesigning of the social protection programs amid the Covid fallout. Shonchoy et al (2021) in their survey found out that among 7338 beneficiaries of old allowance program and widow allowance programme, 41% were reported not to get full benefit amount, 51% of respondents were forced to reduce medical allowance and 22% of them were forced to reduce food consumption<sup>i</sup>.

Grosh et al. (2008) pointed out that SSNPs can assist to accomplish mainly four general goals that could be sequentially aim of poverty reduction. Firstly, SSNPs have an instant effect on reducing inequality and hardcore poverty; secondly, the programmes facilitate poor family for better investment in nearer future; thirdly, these assist targeted poor households to manage various risk like natural or idiosyncratic risks, and fourthly, the interventions assist the governments to formulate useful economic reforms. Thus, SSNPs might be associated with poverty reduction and prevention. It is argued that SSNs are essential to target people with low incomes or in crisis to give temporary assistance or otherwise on a longer term base. And this is supplemental income transfers for destitute citizens like older citizen, poorer households in the company of kids or disable.

Sarwar (2021), while addressing the relationship between Covid 19 and social safety net programs, has argued in favour of redesigning SSNPs. He has stressed the need for multisectoral and multilevel long-term programmes. He sheds light on the urban informal economic workers by stating their increased credit burden, forced use of their savings, borrowing informally and cutting down on food intake situation. He wanted

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.poverty-action.org/recovr-study/safety-nets-and-pandemic-state-social-benefit-payments-during-covid-19-bangladesh>

policy makers to select target groups appropriately with long term interventions and effective and efficient implications. He notes:

‘It is evident that the government identifies safety net as an instrument to tackle the economic shock of Covid -19 on the poor and the vulnerable. But it is also evident that the overnment's approach is disconnected to reality-- skewed towards traditional sectors and schemes and comes short in addressing the emerging challenges. We must rethink the application of social safety nets not just as temporary instruments for shock absorptions, but as levers to address some of the persistent systemic constraints. There have been progresses, for example digitisation of cash transfer. But the promise of safety net as a dynamic instrument for shock response remains unexplored.’ (Sarwar 2021)

National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2015 of Bangladesh government has highlighted and drawn attention as to how the demographic and livelihood patterns of the country are shifting and how the focus of the programme needs to be shifted accordingly:

Much of the SSPs (Social Security Programmes) are focused on addressing the risks faced by the rural poor. With the evolving economic transformation in Bangladesh where both the GDP and employment domination of the rural economy is declining and the urban economy is growing with an increasing number of poor and vulnerable in the urban areas the Social Security system needs to be rethought strategically to anticipate the importance of these changing economic and social dynamics and develop programmes that do not focus only on the rural poor but instead become a more inclusive system whereby the poor and vulnerable can expect to access SSPs irrespective of where they live. (General Economic Division, GOB, 2015)

As the economy grows and the share of modern manufacturing and organized services in both GDP and employment grows, the needs of the SSS will change dramatically. The SSS agenda for the middle-income economy will be vastly different from the present agenda that is dominated by concerns of food security and rural employment. **The approach to SSS will need to broaden to bring in social insurance and employment regulations issues.** This debate is already happening in the context of the Readymade Garments (RMG) sector. (General Economic Division, GOB, 2015; emphasis added.)

The approach to delivering social benefits will therefore need to broaden from the concept of a safety net to a more inclusive concept of a social protection strategy that is aligned to the life cycle and incorporates formal employment policies as well as social insurance schemes. **This will fit more cogently with the needs of a modern urban-based economy the demand for this is already seen from the risks faced by the Readymade Garments sector.** (General Economic Division, GOB, 2015; emphasis added.)

This review of literature (including government's policy documents) shows that Bangladesh's SSNPs are yet to be formulated with a view to provide much needed social protection, security, insurance and employment-related safeguard to the garment workers and their family members. In fact, the policies of the country are yet to adequately appreciate the need to be more inclusive and sensitive to the vulnerabilities and precarities of the workers who are employed in this export-oriented garment sector. This also needs to be recognized that the workers, in the context of their diverse precarities and vulnerabilities, are almost always exposed to the possibilities of sliding back into impoverishment and hardship.

As the basic formation of the economy and society of the country has been transforming gradually to include more formal and informal ways of livelihood for the internally migrant people who are based in urban and semi-urban settings, it has become an imperative for the government to adequately focus on ensuring wellbeing of these working-class people. Conventional ways in which socially impoverished and marginal groups were targeted with the help of SSNPs would not be adequate. This has already been recognized in the government's National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) documents.

Whereas a significant section of the population is now earning their livelihoods in course of their dependence on formal and informal economic activities based in urban and semi-urban localities, diversified security, protection and insurance measures would be needed to deal with the uncertainty, precarity, risks and threats that emanate from their current livelihood patterns. To meet the goals of the SDGs, the lifeways of these people have to adequately accounted for. Even though these people are not most marginal or most impoverished in the conventional sense, they are always under the

threat of losing their job and being forced to slide down to a condition of marginality and livelihood-loss.

The garment workers and other formal and informal workers, whose income earning involves significant precarity and potentials of slipping back to poverty, must be provided with different kind of supports and buffers so that they can sustain lean time and associated risks and threats. Otherwise, their process of coming out from impoverishment would not be sustainable.

This is a point about redesigning and reconceptualizing social security as a whole. The importance of reconceptualizing ‘social protection’ or ‘social security’ in the light this changed scenario has come to be further accentuated during covid pandemic period. It was evident that garment workers of Bangladesh, among others, deserve to have various social and economic supports in institutionally robust ways so as to make sure that they do not slip back to the condition of impoverishment that they were previously living in. In terms of achieving sustainable development goals this should be a key area of focus that garment workers are not pushed back into hardship and insecurity due to sudden shock or disaster. The section below reviews the relevant literature to glean in insights that came to the fore during the pandemic period.

### **2.3 The Covid Pandemic and Bangladesh Garment Workers**

Covid 19 has brought to the fore many aspects with regards to the lifeways of working people in Bangladesh and have shown that achievements might not be as sustainable or as robust as it generally appears to be. This glaring collapse of ‘successes’ and ‘achievements’ has caused threats to the lived experiences of both men and women. This has brought about some serious setbacks that might significantly constrain the journey toward attaining the SDGs by 2030.

In terms of how the pandemic has impacted Bangladesh economy and its RMG sector, it might be noted that with the increase in the number of COVID-19 infections in the country, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) declared a state of lockdown (closure of all public and private offices) in the country from the 26 March 2020, which continued until 30 May 2020. As a result of the lockdown, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporter Association (BGMEA) closed their factories in line with

the government's lockdown instruction. In addition, clothing shipment processes became problematic due to the increasing global lockdown impacted by COVID-19, and while demand for online purchases may have increased, supply chains could not continue to meet demand given changes to freight options. As a result, about 10 million working people, including RMG workers, returned to their hometowns from Dhaka (the capital city of Bangladesh, where most of the garment factories are located) as they would be unable to support themselves in Dhaka without work.

Unfortunately, during the return journey safety measures related to the prevention of COVID-19 such as maintaining minimum safe social distance from others were not respected. Huge crowds were reported on buses, ferries and trains without maintaining personal protection, which represents a serious risk for infection transmission.

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 covered 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.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (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 were often proved to be insufficient. Though many 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 was evidence that suggested that these guidelines had not been followed; for example, there have been reports in the media that suggested that a significant number of pregnant workers had been laid off.

Reports also found that RMG workers' mental health was also affected, due to the tensions of future job insecurity and fear of becoming infected with or dying of Covid.

It has been widely reported that the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic for these RMG workers has been dire and included uncertainty about whether they will be entitled to wages during the COVID-19 pandemic and related issues such as lack of money for essentials such as food, and concerns about the re-opening of factories during COVID-19 infection peak times. Other concerns that came dominantly to the fore are the health risks due to lack of preventative measures in the workplace, and the development of mental health conditions due to the impact of the loss of employment and the fear of contracting COVID-19.

Altogether, the Covid pandemic profoundly affected Bangladesh's economy along with its labour market. The shutdown, or slowdown, of economic activities in the early and mid-phase of the pandemic has impacted the income and livelihoods of the working people significantly. Bangladesh's largest export earning sector—ready-made garments (RMG) – was no exception. An estimate by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) showed that, due to cancellation of orders and delayed payments, the industry lost \$4.33 billion worth of exports between March and June of 2020. This trend continued during the following months. 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 (CPD 2021). A study conducted by Penn State University reported that as the early stage of the coronavirus pandemic took hold, more than half of Bangladesh suppliers have had the bulk of their in-process, or already completed, production canceled. 45.8% of suppliers report that 'a lot' to 'most' of their nearly completed or entirely completed orders have been canceled by their buyers and 5.9% had all of these orders canceled. When orders were canceled, 72.1% of buyers refused to pay for raw materials (fabric, etc.) already purchased by the supplier, and 91.3% of buyers refused to pay for the cut-make-trim cost (production cost) of the supplier. As a result of order cancellations and lack of payment, 58% of factories surveyed reported having to shutdown most or all of their operations (Anner 2020).

The report also noted how the workers were impacted by the unfolding crisis. It showed that more than one million garment workers in Bangladesh were fired or furloughed (suspended from work) as a result of order cancellations and the failure of buyers to pay for these cancellations (as the data was gathered during the early months of the pandemic). Suppliers in the survey reported that 98.1% of buyers refused to contribute to the cost of paying the partial wages to furloughed workers that the law requires. 72.4% of furloughed workers were sent home without pay. 97.3% of buyers refused to contribute to severance pay expenses of dismissed workers, also a legal entitlement in Bangladesh. 80.4% of dismissed workers were sent home without their severance pay.

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) prepared crisis report dealing with the situation 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. The loss of income has been devastating, pushing many further into poverty.

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 (approx. €11.9 billion) were provided. The government 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 80% of their production. Bangladesh Bank also adopted measures to ease the economic burden, including a moratorium on loan payments that lasted till 30 September 2020 and provisions were made to ensure 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. 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.



However, Covid-19 and measures adopted have a differential effect on workers of all genders, with the consequence of limiting their work, economic opportunities, independence, and health. Measures that did not address gender inequalities during Covid-19 had disproportionately aggravated the situation of garment workers, especially women. It became apparent that it was an imperative to integrate a gendered perspective into the responses and policies with a view to help recognise and combat the variance in impact of the pandemic as well as the distribution of resources, opportunities, constraints and power during this crisis. As we consider the social impact of squeezing of economy in the consequence of the pandemic, we may consider an incident that Kabir, Maple and Usher (2020) have reported – the incident took place in the early phase of the pandemic that gives us insights as to how the unfolding situation affected the everyday lives of garment workers:

Parents working in a garment factory located in Gazipur (near Dhaka) had to sell their new-born baby, as they could not pay the hospital bill of BDT 25,000. The father of the new-born baby said that they could not manage hospital bills as the garment factory, where both husband and wife used to work, was closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the local police rescued the baby and returned it to their parents. [...]It is just one example of the terrible toll COVID-19 has had on the readymade garment (RMG) industry workers in Bangladesh. RMG workers were already established as a highly vulnerable group before COVID-19, with the evidence of heightened risk being reported including the evidence of rape and suicidal cases (during lockdown), infections and deaths related to COVID-19.

The gendered impact of the crisis deserves to get special attention. In Bangladesh, women make up the majority of the RMG workforce, around 55-60%, but their social position as well as existing production regime, labour relationship and managerial hierarchy put them under greater stress as their vulnerability, greater work burden and pressure of social gaze come prominently into play. In most cases the women and girls employed in the sector are young, and quite frequently are among the first generation of women working in the formal labour market. As they have been among the lowest paid stratum of workforce, they had not been able to earn enough to have accumulated a financial safety net prior to the pandemic.

The impact of the loss of income went beyond the the financial stress itself: women disproportionately had to spend their income for the wellbeing of their family and community. Moreover, women in Bangaldesh society generally shoulder most care responsibilities in the home—including childcare, elderly care, and providing sick care. The burden of these responsibilities has increased significantly due to the crisis, and shutdown of schools and health care provisions. The precarious position has put women at an increased risk of violence, harassment, and vulnerability. T

he fact that women workers voice, needs and wants are often overlooked in terms of wages, benefits, health and safety issues came more glaringly to the fore. Thus, the impact of pandemic in general and its gendered nature in particular show that women garment workers of Bangaldesh RMG sector were particularly under increased stress as the pandemic unfolded.

This re-emphasizes that point that we have noted already above: to achieve sustainable development, the working class – particularly the women employed in the RMG sector – deserve to have greater policy support. This is a point that gained new significance in the context of covid pandemic.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter presents a description of the methodology that is employed in the study. It spells out the techniques and methods of sampling, data collection, processing, analysis, and the area in which the study is carried out. The chapter also highlights the limitations and problems encountered while collecting data. It details and justifies the methodology and research adopted here.

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

Qualitative exploration was carried out with a view to bringing about in-depth understanding about the social and transformation processes. Efforts have been taken to explore the role of working-class men and women in economic growth of the country.

#### **3.2 Study Area**

The study area, that is Ashulia and Savar area in the suburb of Dhaka city, was selected purposively to ensure that the lives of both men and women employed in the garment factories are taken into consideration. The focus was to see how the pandemic has impacted their social and family lives.

The efforts of the government and other stakeholders to provide support to the workers particularly in the time of pandemic was also examined.

#### **3.3 Population and Sampling**

To substantiate the findings of comprehensive literature review, Key Informant Interview (KII) and Focus group discussion were conducted. Key informants were categorized into four cluster/groups: i) Factory owners and managers ii) Local Government Officials of the areas in which workers live; iii) Factory workers, labour leaders and iv) Development professionals who work among the workers and relevant experts; journalists; local elites and other stakeholders.

We have used a purposeful sampling method to determine key informants for the semi-structured interviews. The primary mode of data collection was interviewing the workers; a total of 35 respondents were interviewed through KII, and 16 working women took part in two Focus Group Discussions.

### **3.4 Data Collection Methods**

Different methods of qualitative data collection were adopted. Along with conducting in-depth interviews of the key respondents and arranging focus group discussions, researchers observed everyday activities and events of men and women. Notes were taken about the ways in which interactions, events and actions unfolded.

Research team members (team leader and two research assistants – one male assistant and one female) went into the locales in which workers reside. It included Kuturia, Shewalia and Pandhoa area of Ashulia thana under Savar upazila (subdistrict). The research team members went inside the houses, observed their everyday life route, e.g., their living arrangement, their family interactions, husband-wife and parent-childrne conversations, also observed their life as they took preparation to go to the factory, they return from the factory and cook their food. They took field notes and arranged spontaneous group discussions. researchers went inside the locales where workers live and observed everyday activities of men and women as well as taking note of the ways in which interactions, events and actions unfold. They took field notes and arranged spontaneous group discussions.

This secondary dataset involved collection and study of relevant books, journals, research reports, seminar reports, reports on SDGs in Bangladesh, unpublished documents, editorials of major or national newspapers and internet sources. Relevant policies of the government of Bangladesh were thoroughly reviewed.

Since ‘social distancing’ and observing other health-related protocols remained in place because of the pandemic, the research team were respectful to the rules; safety of the respondents and researchers was of priority. Workers were not approached for interview in their workplace; they were requested for the interviews particularly during the weekends when they stayed at home. Female interviewers talked to female workers

by observing all the health protocols. Since this meant that reaching many workers were possible within the stipulated time, we increased numbers of female interviewers.

After collecting the data through fieldwork, data sorting and data reduction were carried out with exceptional care that relevant information is not lost.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Methods**

Thematic data analysis technique has been employed. FGD and KII were recorded and then transcribed. Field level observation notes were also recorded. At the phase of data analysis all the transcribed data was repeatedly read and re-read to ensure accuracy. Building on the ideas generated through transcription, the researchers were able to identify relationships between themes pertinent to the research questions. ‘Case Studies’ were developed based on the data gathered through detailed interviews of the key informants. Data was then presented in line with the prominent themes.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

#### 4.0 Introduction

The main purpose of this chapter is to present, analyze, and critically reflect on the findings that we have been able to collate in course of our fieldwork process. Whereas in previous chapters we looked into the literature and background situation to locate the lives of Bangladesh garment workers with regard to both SDGs and covid-19 generated impacts, here we examine how the impacts have been played out in the lives of the male and female workers who we have talked to and whose life process we have observed closely. This analysis first makes a focused effort to relate the insights brought forward by the foregoing discussions to the practical situation on the ground, this then paves way to policy recommendations.

As we will see from the analysis of life histories, case studies and group discussions, it was clearly evident that deepening of insecurity and precarity is the foremost feature that came along time and again during our fieldwork process. In the context of covid, both male and female workers found it hard to cope up with the severe forms of uncertainties and anxieties as they were already in a position of vulnerability. Despite all the forceful and engulfing stresses, the garment workers and their family members tried hard to make life possible – they showed resilience and kept on struggling. Support from the state, from the factory owners or from the society was not adequate in most cases; however, informal forms of assistance and protection being made available by the kins, neighbors, co-workers and factory owners played crucial role in enabling the workers to survive in a situation that appeared mostly like an unending nightmare.

Whereas because of the rupture in the global supply chain, several factories were either without new orders or were not getting clearance to make the shipment, the ultimate brunt of the adverse situation had to be borne by the workers. Many of the factories closed their operation fully, whereas the other ones went for partial closure that led to job loss for many workers. Therefore, incidents of factories being forced to fully or

partially shut down their operations were frequent. However, along with these incidents of job loss, what mattered a lot was the uncertainties as to the factories were going to remain in operation or not. The stress and anxiety caused by indecisiveness as to whether the factories should run at the time of lock-down or not and how to travel to and from the capital city to village homes was a big source of panic and suffering.

Moreover, the social stigma that the 'expandable bodies' of the workers experienced with regards to social distancing, travelling and other pandemic related issues were powerful factors that notably affected the wellbeing of the workers. Professional stress and uncertainty were thus augmented with the addition of social and psychological uncertainties, attitudinal problems and stigmas.

The way the workers eked out their lifeways amid such precarious, stressful, and stigmatized situation is the issue that tells a lot about the state of state, society, and public policy. It importantly sheds light as to the limitations of the state's capacity to take care of the vulnerable at the time of crisis as well as how far the public policy and administrative settings are capable and how far they need to be strengthened.

It also shows how kinship, informal social protection and social support systems proved their value in newer and reinforced ways. It is in the backdrop of such insight that we may appreciate as to why in the context of the pandemic in Bangladesh the academics have brought this question to the fore again: 'Is Bangladesh a weak state in a strong society?'

Based on our analysis of the qualitative data, we see that the lives of the workers employed in the RMG sector of Bangladesh feature significant insecurity and precarity. The sector is governed in a way that workers are continuously exposed to different forms of vulnerability, and they persistently feel the threat that they might slip back to impoverishment and hardship.

Starting from a perennial threat of losing their job anytime, they go through challenges and anxieties relating to workplace professional hazards, low quality housing, inadequate health care facilities, different mental stress, childcare problems and lack of social wellbeing. As they find themselves always in a precarious condition, they look

for informal support and care from family and relatives. However, the support and security that they can get through kinship or other informal social networks are not adequate. The support they get from the factory owners and government also proves to be inadequate.

The situation further worsened with the unfolding of the pandemic. The way they were exposed, and their everyday living came under threat, it highlighted how peril their condition was. Even though they are employed in the so-called 'formal' sector, they were all of a sudden pushed back to a situation of aggravated insecurity. This thinness of their security means that the state and society must seriously rethink about the greater protection and security measures that might be made available for the workers. To make the development journey of the country more sustainable and to make the journey to SDG achievement more viable, this broadening of focus now appears to be an imperative.

As we analyze the qualitative data, we focus on 3 main themes here: (i) Covid and deepening of insecurity and precarity of the RMG workers; (ii) The reconfiguration of Social Space (and gender relations) at the time of pandemic; (iii) The ingenuity of the workers and the social context of making life possible. We basically explore and examine different case studies (derived from KII, FGD and follow-up observations) to show how the impacts of the pandemic and already-existent precarity unfolded in the lives of the workers.

The first part has been outlined to sketch and depict the factory- and work-induced precarity which has given way to increased human insecurity as well. The second part deals with the vacuum or tension that was created in the social space. The workers and their family members had to experience and deal with the increased vulnerability in the family and social sphere – this was noted in the third section. During their struggle, they faced tough times and remarkable odds whereas notable social and informal supports were also in play.

By examining three strands of the lifeways of the RMG workers in the context of the covid crisis, we try here to show both weaknesses and strengths of our society. This helps us to argue that whereas the state and capitalist production system is not



adequately prepared to ensure the wellbeing of the working-class people, our society has significant features of resilience and reciprocity that we need to recognize and take care of. As we think about broadened approaches of sustainable social development and more sensible public policies, we argue in favour of taking care of both our strengths and inadequacies. This is how we may pave way to more context specific social development initiatives.

#### **4.1 Deepened Insecurity, Increased Precarity and Social Stigmatization**

The RMG workers of Bangladesh experienced extensive problems during the covid pandemic period that made their life more vulnerable and precarious. This section describes the reasons for such precarity that we have come to know through KII and FGD. It is not that the pandemic created all the problems anew; in fact, the problems that were already ubiquitous in their lives have augmented, deteriorated, intensified and taken newer shapes in the context of unfolding tensions, anxieties and uncertainties during the pandemic.

##### **4.1.1 Covid and increased professional uncertainties**

As we talked to the workers in in-depth interviews, it became clear that it is an issue of debate and scrutiny as to whether the jobs of men and women working in the garment sector should be termed as 'formal' or 'informal'. During covid, this question gained renewed significance and the precarity that the workers experienced became glaringly clear. The first case of Covid in Bangladesh was reported on March 8, 2020. Considering the situation, the government announced lockdown on 26<sup>th</sup> of the same month. All garment factories remained closed till the 30<sup>th</sup> of May. On July 7, BGMEA announced that they wanted to open factories and asked workers to join as soon as possible. This sudden notice caused chaos. Respondents said that there were many who left Dhaka and went home during lockdown. Due to ongoing lockdown, workers could not get access to transportation. Many could not return to Dhaka. Few tried to come to Dhaka by walking and using different vehicles by paying double or more fares.

At that time, this decision of BGMEA was criticized from various sectors, and the Association again decided to close the factory for a few more days. They were in economic strain as most of the workers did not get salary for months because of sudden

lockdown. Those who returned to Dhaka were in trouble. They ran out of money and did not have money to go back to village again. A respondent said that he waited for some time in Dhaka and when there was no possibility of opening the factory, he took a job at a construction site. After the opening of the factory, he worked in the factory during the day and at the construction site at night. According to him, he was forced to work in two places due to the impact of Covid and the rise of goods' price.

Many of the workers could not find any way to come back to Dhaka. Those who reported this to the supervisor of the factory were told by the supervisor that they would lose their job if they did not return Dhaka and join factory in time. A good number of the workers lost their jobs since they failed to return to Dhaka on time. One of interlocutors in a FGD told that in case a worker was sick, if someone informed the factory, then she/he was told to rest at home. Later when he returned after 7 days or 10 days, he was told that he was fired for taking 7 days leave without notice. Again, if a worker became sick while in the factory, the authority sent her home with a signature on a white paper. After her recovery she was not allowed to join again. Workers taking part in FGDs described how some of them became jobless in such ways. They reminded that even before Covid, the employers did not want to give leave to the workers, they always followed very strict rules regarding this. During covid, the situation worsened. Consequently, a large number of workers lost their jobs and remained jobless for months.

Following BGMEA's decision to keep the factories running in compliance with hygiene rules, the factory owners gradually started opening the factories. Rules such as keeping a safe distance, wearing a mask, taking time off if a worker is sick were provided as instructions. Our study respondents describe how they observed these newly introduced regime that included wearing a mask, sanitizing their hands at certain intervals, and others. Several respondents noted that the attendance bonus of the day was cut off if a worker failed to wear a mask.

However, not all garment factories were able to enforce these hygiene rules. Moreover, in the densely populated way in which the garment industry employed workers, it was challenging to maintain the hygienic conditions. This challenging condition caused psychological distress and increased the precarity and anxiety of the workers.

Starting from April 2020, buyers canceled orders worth three billion dollars due to which about two million workers were affected. As of April 2021, 238 factories were closed, and three and a half lakh workers lost their jobs. And most of the workers of this closed factory did not get their salaries; owners could not pay the workers according to the rules they were supposed to provide if they were to be closed. A few factories opened to cope with the aftermath, but they hired 60 percent new workers.

The government announced incentive package during pandemic period when garments were at the verge of shutting down, due to non-payment of wages and strained relationship between workers and owners. That announcement of 5000 million incentives temporarily stabilized workers and employers. But evidence from the statements of the respondents showed that there was unbalanced distribution of these incentives. Incentives were used in many ways. Some factories offered incentives to pay due. Even if for most of the workers due was 10,000 BDT or more, they were given only 5000 BDT. Many claim that acquaintances of powerful factory administrators have received more than 5000 as incentives in some factories. There have been cases where they have received incentives three times or five times by submitting different NID cards.

#### **4.1.2 Professional uncertainties and its spiral impacts: The case of Lailee<sup>i</sup>**

We interviewed Laile in two sessions – in fact on two Fridays we managed to listen to her to understand the ways in which the impacts of pandemic played out in her life and in the context of her family and household. Lailee came to Savar from Jamalpur six years back. By the time we were talking to her, she was 27 years old. 11 years ago, when she was only 16, she was married off to Mr. Halim, who is a remittance earner working in Qatar. Lailee has got her parents, two sisters and one brother at home whereas Halim also has parents and siblings. Both sides need their financial support. However, the money that Halim would send from abroad was not adequate anyway. So, Lailee decided to join a garment factory to help the family run more smoothly.

It was through one of her *khalato bon* that Lailee got a job in a factory. She consulted

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<sup>i</sup>Lailee is a pseudonym. In fact, all the names used in the document is fictitious although they represent the real person who we interviewed and talked to in FGD session.

her husband while taking this decision. She was employed in the sewing section from where her monthly income was 10 thousand and 800 Taka. However, sometimes this earning would rise to 15 to 16 thousand Taka as it included the extra money that she got through doing overtime duties.

Lailee has got two sons: the elder one is 7 years old who studies in a local school and the younger one is 3 years old who has just started school. She, along with two sons, live in a single room which has got an attached bathroom. She has to spend around 4 thousand taka for house rent and around 2 thousand taka is needed for her sons' study related issues.

During the covid pandemic, the factory that Lailee would work in remained closed for 40 days at a stretch. Lailee still gets flustered when she recalls those days – it was a nightmare like situation which left her feel totally frustrated and given up. All the things became so distressful. When the factory got closed, she broke down totally as she could not see what she was to do. Nothing she could think about. Since the factory was shut down, she thought about going back to the village. However, the news was ripe everywhere that all the things were closed in the village too; moreover, transportation facilities were difficult to avail. Lailee had nowhere to go with two sons.

Within this difficult time, Lailee became more worried as she was not getting any phone call from her husband. Ten days passed without hearing anything from her husband. Those were perhaps the most difficult days of her life. After ten days, she came to know that her husband had lost his job and was in prison in Qatar. The company for which Halim had been working became a loan-defaulter and got entangled in legal complexities. The workers were involved in a row with the company management as they were not getting their salary. This led to strong clashes and consequently Halim was apprehended by the local police. He spent days in prison and then was deported to Bangladesh. Lailee described her situation this way to us:

It was a helpless situation for us. I became totally out of my mind. The factory was closed, I was unable to think about anything, and then I came to know that my husband was in prison. How frightened we were at that time! I even stopped eating food. When he came back home, we were contented that he was at least alive. Our man is alive,

and he has returned, we could now survive somehow. He could not bring any money – they did not give him the 8 months' salary which he was due to get. He had to flee home from there. What could we do if they had killed him? Could we get justice?

After returning home, Halim stayed in Savar with Lailee and the sons – amid the pandemic situation he did not think about going back to the village. The situation was difficult for Lailee in several ways: her husband was jobless and was not willing to look for a way to earn something; her own workplace was closed, and it was uncertain as to when the factory might open.

However, a few days later Lailee came to know that her garment factory management was going to pay 60% of their arrears. She knew that it was insufficient; still it helped them to have at least some rice two times a day during that lean time. The factory would let them know about closure extension decisions through mobile text messages. They first declared seven days closure, it then extended up to fifteen days. Every time a new extension decision came, Lailee became further upset and anxious. Still, she tried her best to keep the spirit of her husband up. As her husband was so depressed and lost in despair, Lailee kept her cool and tried to convince her husband that they needed to find some ways to survive. Even though her husband did not move or manage to earn income, Lailee started to do some craftwork which she was good at from her childhood. She used the skill that she had to make quilt (*kantha*) and thin mat (*paati*) which helped her to eke out something as a way to stay alive. In her own words:

I made 3 quilts and 5 thin mats within 25 days. The quilt was priced 1000 or 1100 Taka per piece whereas the mats were 200 or 300 Taka per piece. At that time 100 taka was like 1000 taka to us. We could not buy anything for the children; even, we could not eat three times a day. You may not believe but we started to eat watered rice with green chilies. Here in this city no one is there to care for you.

The story of Lailee shines bright light on the harsh reality of life that became typical to working class people at the time of covid pandemic. It was difficult time for everyone – however, in case of Lailee, like many other women that we have talked to – it was the 'responsibility' of the lead women in the family to provide emotional anchorage to the members of the family. Lailee's husband passed through a real tough time abroad,

and it was expectedly difficult for him to find a way of earning income in this tough time. However, as Lailee observed and narrated to us, Halim did neither look for a work nor did he show any willingness to do any work to earn income. Halim was always thinking about going abroad again. When it was clear that managing to go abroad was not likely to happen soon, he could look for a temporary way to earn livelihood for himself and his family members. He did not go for this option. Lailee could not give up – she had to sew quilts and make mats whereas providing affection and mental support to the husband and other family members were also her assumed duties. Maintaining peace and happiness in the family was not an easy task amid so much tension and anxiety. Halim would lose his cool time and again, shouting to the sons and raising hand on Lailee became quite frequent at that time. Lailee described the despair in this way:

Men are there always for money. There was no money and no work. He could not see a way to have money in the near future either. So, it was expected that he was going to lose his temper. I could not give him food in proper way. As a man how long could he endure the hunger? He could not put up with it. I did not say a thing.

With time the situation has improved. Lailee's factory has resumed its production and she is hopeful that her husband will soon be able to go back to a country abroad to earn income there as a labourer. Her sons are set to go back to school. The situation might no longer be as difficult as it was at the time of pandemic. However, things are not quite easy all together. Her hard work does not earn enough to give peace and happiness to herself and her family members.

#### **4.1.3 Giving up hope and aspiration: The case of Monwara**

Monwara is a 35-year-old married woman who got married in 2002 to Faruque who was a garment worker at that time. She currently lives in Shenwalia area of Savar sub-district under Dhaka district. During the early years of her marriage, she would stay in the village mainly with her in-laws and her husband would stay in Dhaka to do his garment work. In 2008 she came to Dhaka and got a job in a garment factory. The couple has got two children – the elder one is a daughter and the younger one is a son. Monwara was a sewing section worker in a factory that was shut down in the beginning of covid pandemic whereas her husband's factory also took the same path.

Unlike Lailee, Monwara and her husband took the decision that it was better for them to go back to the village as they had no one to rely on in Savar and as the factories were closed for an indefinite period. They thought that they had relatives in the village who would not let them down and provide much needed support in the time of such calamity. However, one very bad consequence of moving back to the village was that as they could not come back in time, Monwara did not get the 60% arrears that the factory gave later. Not only that, but her name was also removed from the workers' registry of the factory. After the crisis was over, Monwara came back and could join the same factory. However, she was told that since she was absent in relevant period, she is no longer eligible to get the arrear.

During their stay in the village, the situation was not easier either. Since they returned to the village from the town, the red flag was hoisted in their house. In such a tough situation, Faruque was stuck by a brain stroke. Taking care of two children and then dealing with such a health hazard of her husband put Monwara in a tough situation. This led her to give in all the savings of her life. She made some saving through a DPS in which she would save 2 thousand taka a month. As the DPS matured, she bought a plot of land in the village with a view to making their house there. She had to sell the land to make sure that her husband gets much needed treatment. All the money was spent away.

While they were staying in the village, they got the news that the factories were opening after a while and then were getting shut down again. Given this uncertainty and the ill health of her husband, they decided to stay in the village. All through the covid period, Monwara's mother-in-law stayed with them. This meant that she had to feed all together five persons along with taking care of her ailing husband. She would rear chicken and duck and would raise two cows. These were the sources of their everyday expenditures.

The situation became so unbearable that all the members of the family appeared like burdens to them. Amid all this, there was a marriage proposal for her elder daughter who was still in her teens. They had known the boy for long as he was from the neighbourhood. He was a good boy with a steady income as a driver, so they did not

want to miss the opportunity. Yes, it is true that the daughter was still too young to marry off and she was studying in class IX. Had it been normal time, they would not have thought about this. However, given all the uncertainties and particularly because of Monwara's husband's physical condition, Monwara could not think of saying no to the proposal. Monwara decribed the difficulties this way:

I was a woman – a helpless wowan. Who was there on whom I could rely? Who was my own? *Amar apon jon ke chilo?* How would I marry off the daughter if anything bad had happened to her father? There was no guarantee as to what was going to happen to him. Everyone suggested that I should go for the marriage of the girl. I had to listen to them.

Monwara said that she never had any confusion that it was not a good thing to marry off a young daughter that she did. It was a mistake. However, she could not but do it. She had no other way to go.

## **4.2 The reconfiguration of Social Space at the time of Pandemic**

### **4.2.1 Intensification of marginality in urban and semi-urban spatial setting:**

#### **The case of Shahana Khatun**

Shahana Khatun is a knit operator. When she was newly married, Shahana used to live in a slum like settlement in Kuturia area of Ashlia along with her husband. Shahana's husband works as bike driver. Before pandemic, Shahana used to wake up at six. She had to take a shower and made breakfast and lunch for them. At 7:45, Shahana went to the factory as it was just beside her living area. During lunch time, she used to come home and had her lunch after washing clothes. After having lunch, she would go back to the factory again. If she didn't have overtime, she would come back home in the evening. But those days, when she got OT (that is, overtime duty), she needed to stay till 10 pm or 2 am. Whenever she got the time to come home, she had to cook. In doing so, she hardly got time for herself.

During Covid, when her factory was closed because of lockdown, she was at home. Even though she was at home, her responsibilities escalated because of Covid. The family didn't have any savings as they had to look after their in-laws. They were new at that labor colony, so they were not acquainted with many people. Getting help from



them was not possible. Then they decided to stay at her relative's house for a few days in a nearby locality. Living there for a few days, they got into a quarrel, and they had to come back.

They were not sure to whom they would call for help. Going back to the village was not an option for them as they had a love marriage which is why she was not accepted by her in-laws. Her husband at that time was not interested to join in a construction site as it would hamper his status. They decided that they would stay separated and go to their own houses in the village and come back while the situation would get better. Covid as an extra burden made her a carrier of virus for which her parents told her not to go to village. Having no options behind, Shahana started to live in a sub-let setting with other girls sharing a room of four and her husband went to his village.

Living in urban or semi-urban slum-like settlement is not a choice but necessity of the informal migrated workers. Such scattered settlements and the conditions of those areas are known to every actor of the administration, but no one gives specific attention to them. Because, according to Larkin (2013), urban neo-liberal development projects can be legitimized and made visible only by presenting some urban communities as marginal. These projects act as material evidence to the neoliberal economy on the one hand, while the nation-state enters a paradigm of visible modernity on the other. Legitimization of these projects is only possible if there is a marginalized community with which they can make a comparison. As a result, these floating informal communities can never 'own' the city and think of themselves as 'other' and accept their living arrangements without questioning. Garments workers who are addressed as the driving force of the national economy are facing difficulties because of this politics of marginality in the urban and semi-urban settlements.

What the case of Shahana Khatun demonstrates is that when the factory was closed down, she was constrained by her structural marginality and had to accept poverty and relinquish her assertiveness as a person. She tried to survive by compromising rather than resisting or negotiating. Because of the intersections of different marginal conditions featuring the lives of semi-urban impoverished setting, the insecurity of women garment workers increased further.

Shahana's life trajectories show how the already poor and marginalized groups of women experienced intensification of their vulnerability at the time of covid. A situation of increased insecurity can force an already vulnerable person to give up her hopes and aspirations and to capitulate to structural injustices.

#### **4.2.2 Increased work burden of female garment workers at the time of crisis: 'Triple burden' and beyond**

When the managerial and 'affective' work of society come to be combined with the productive and reproductive duties of women, it may be identified as 'triple burden'. Authors address this concept while highlighting gender analysis. Nawaz and McLaren (2016) in their write-up infer that women's participation in productive work is thought to be as routine and less valued and visible in comparison to men. On the other hand, reproductive work is thought to be performed by women and is usually understood as non-monetized, hidden and discursively cast as not "real work" (Delaney and Macdonald 2018). In respect to productive and reproductive work, societal and emotional activities are also performed by women which are seen as voluntary. Even though women carry out these duties with much physical and emotional commitment, these are acknowledged most of the time as undervalued. Women's participation in these three spheres casts a burden on them and makes their life more exposed, fragile and anxious.

Initiatives taken from development perspective address the triple burden of gender and as for interventions for socially situated ways of empowering women. But what is missing in such interventions is that while performing such activities women experience worsening of their overall wellbeing. Disease outbreak, disaster or other crisis increases these workloads for women which makes women's inability to balance their time among such spheres. According to McLaren et al. (2020), at the time of Covid-19, women's burdens across all spheres has increased a lot and these were not only heavier, but also more dangerous for women of all domains. Authors undertook a gender analysis from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam and Australia. They argued that women's reproductive burdens have been perpetuated, reinforced, and increased in the context of Covid 19. In case of Bangladesh, the situation has not been different. Rather it has been found out that not only Covid 19 perpetuated vulnerability but also it acted as an added burden which made women even more vulnerable.

### **4.2.3 Informal indebtedness and increased insecurity: The case of Suma Begum**

Suma Begum had been working in several garments for 16 years. Her husband, an occasional rickshaw puller, couldn't support her family financially as he had kidney problems for more than five years. One of her sons got married and started to live separately. Suma Begum was the only earning member who looked after her family of four members. At that time when Covid was at its peak, Suma's husband got severely sick. He died even though Suma made all the efforts to save her husband's life. Suma lost all her savings and she had to get financial support from her relatives and neighbors. She was not getting salary as factory remained closed for lockdown. Room rent was due for months and she was told to leave.

As Suma had already taken money from her well-wishers, she was not able to ask for more. Here it might also be noted that her relatives and neighbors were all in that same vulnerable situation. Later she left that room and went for a room-rental with her mother. Her mother was also not in a condition to take care of her family for days. She started taking daily necessities from a shop by opening a '*bakir khata*'. Her debts were escalating. In total she was having a debt of 65,000 BDT by the time we talked to her. She was not getting informal jobs. She made her younger son join a construction site. She was searching for jobs, but she was not getting any as getting informal job in Dhaka's suburban areas is highly gendered. Finally, she joined a household as a helping hand. This is how she was living her life during Covid.

According to Mondol (2014), women's burden during any outbreak can be said as severe as the pandemic itself. This can be thought of as meaningful as we look into cases described above. Suma Begum, while trying to perform her roles, faced numerous challenges which turned into burden for her. As a woman, her sufferings and workloads of reproductive work increased and added up to her productive work-pressure. Even though she has managed to get involved in productive work, it was not sustainable. Rather the increased amount of burden that she is concerned that all these may have much negative impact on her mental and physical condition.

The life of Suma – particularly, her persistent vulnerability not only shows the burdens she is bearing but also addresses a major gap in societal support that she needs to get. This situation also calls for attention that even though statistical data shows evidence of lessening gender gap, in practice it is important to incorporate diverse forms of experiences that the women go through. The socially situated senses of gains and losses must be taken seriously into policy discourse. Women’s role in taking care of the family members or of the children, and how their earnings are divided and distributed among differentiated household settings are to be taken into consideration.

### **4.3 The ingenuity of the workers: The social context of making life possible**

The RMG workers faced problems from all levels including family, society, state, and transnational levels which have contributed toward augmentation of their precarity and vulnerability. But even after struggling, what is important to recognize is that they do not give up easily. They tried hard and at times they showed ingenuity to prove themselves resilient and fit in terms of industrial production and social reproduction. Mainly survival processes of theirs are discussed above. Along with description of their adversaries, this also needs to be recognized that the garment workers still made life possible.

This is important for the policy makers to look into the strategies and challenges that the real-life actors bring forward. These might become significant constituents of policy paradigm. Especially since the various manifestations and uses of social relations are their driving force, the objective of this section is to put this question forward as to whether these relational realities can be appropriated with adequate attention in terms of policy interventions.

#### **4.3.1 Garment workers ‘creativity’: Between Dhaka and Village Life**

Workers who didn’t get a job in garment sector during lockdown or whose jobs were terminated, they started to feel dilemma of different kinds. Those who were from Dhaka didn’t have the option to leave Dhaka. But workers who had their opportunity to go to the village were really in a predicament. This section elaborates on these struggles workers were having in that state.

The first and foremost reason for which workers were in a dilemma was that they didn't know when the factory would open. Most of the workers having no money were waiting for a decision. Covid was a new experience for everyone so no one was able to infer what would happen next. One of the interlocutors Rumana whose husband used to go to factory gate every morning, explained the situation this way:

“Everyday in the morning he went to the gate. Those who went to the village used to call him for news. He used to go there to get information and then he would call everyone and inform them that he didn't get any information. We were here from whom they could get information. But we have no one here from whom we can get news. No one knew anything. The supervisor told us to have patience, but he knew nothing.”

Rumana and her husband both used to work at the same factory as the knit operators. They couldn't decide to go as they didn't have the proper news about when the factory would open. This dilemma made them stay in Dhaka and they made plan to save money by eating less. This was one of the strategies many workers of informal sector took to sustain livelihood. But this not only made them vulnerable but at the same time made visible the problem of mismanagement process of the social safety nets which evoke for better food consumption programme, but target population was disproportionately chosen.

Another reason of dilemma was they didn't have enough money to travel to the village. Most of the factories decided to shut down without paying the monthly wage. Not every worker has their savings. On the other hand, there is a tendency of most of the workers to buy daily necessities from shops and pay money at the end of the month. So, when factories were shut down without giving workers their salary, they were already in debt.

Interlocutor Rumana's narratives can be relevant again in this regard:

“We were about to pay 5000 BDT to shopkeeper. Room rent of 6500 BDT was due as well. We had to take care of my in-laws. That's why we send money to them every month. By the end of every month, we face many struggles. It was that time of the

month when were told that there would be lockdown. So, from where we could get money to go to village?”

Money was not the only issue for which workers were struggling. They were struggling because they had strong senses of insecurities as to what would they do after going back to village. In the villages of Bangladesh, structural changes have been taking place over the decades, and basically because of neoliberal economic transformation, informal sectors are increasing there as well.

However, leaving Dhaka forever and starting something new was not an easy decision to make. And starting a startup requires saving which also was not available to the workers at that moment. And another added factor was that pandemic was going on and travelling from one place to another was restricted. News of workers as ‘infection carrier’ was spread to everywhere in Bangladesh. Some workers didn’t want to be identified as those; so, they decided not to leave and wait for the decision of state and administration. While waiting for the decision, they started to spend less and eat less. Interlocutor Rumana stopped sending money to the village. Cutting down living expenses from various sectors became a common ‘strategy’ for many of the workers.

For women this dilemma to take decision to stay here in Dhaka or going to village had other gendered implications as well. In some village area, there is a representation about garments women that their character is bad. They become isolated when they visit villages during vacation. Interlocutor Shahana Khatun said,

“I wanted to go to my husband’s village. It was our love marriage. My in-laws have not accepted me yet. My mother didn’t want me to go to my own village either. I was told they would see me as corona-carrier. And from the beginning when I started garments, they see me differently. I didn’t want to go and here I didn’t have options left either.”

Such scenarios were common during Covid. Later she decided to stay separate from her husband. She sent her husband to the village, and she took a sublet in a shared room with other unmarried girls. This helped her cut down on their expenses. Workers had to maintain constant contact with the village. A part of their income has to be sent to

the village to build support family members and to make some asset or wealth. For example, money has to be sent home to buy cows and goats or to take mortgage land. Workers take care of such responsibilities while working in Dhaka. So, leaving Dhaka or staying was not an easy decision to make for them.

Rural women live in such miserable conditions while working in garments. Their migration to Dhaka in itself doesn't mean they comfortably find niches to live life in Dhaka. Rather, they constantly wander and struggle whether it is in the villages or in Dhaka. During covid these insecurities increased, and they tried several strategies to cope with the situation which not only violated their lifestyle but also posed a threat on the country's efforts to attain sustainable development goals.

#### **4.3.2 Trying hard to stay in Dhaka**

Sudden closure of the garments factories made many leave Dhaka while many decided to stay as well. The dilemmas they were having were addressed in the previous section. This section has specified those stories where workers made it possible to live in Savar or Ashulia area of Dhaka anyway. Several factors have influenced them to stay in Dhaka. Mainly these reasons will be explained in this section to get a sense of how the situation was and coping strategies living in Dhaka was during pandemic for the workers.

The primary reason behind staying in the city was having strong social ties. Many decided to stay in Dhaka if their neighbors and relatives were in Dhaka. They got loan assistance from them. They helped them to get a job as well. This happened in case of respondent the Runa. Her in-laws are all in Munshiganj and her father is a local resident of Dhaka city. Even if her husband wanted to go to the village during pandemic, she did not agree. Later, with the help of her relatives, she got him a job in the garage and waited for the factory to reopen. Many people were able to pay their debts because of the strong relationship with their relatives. Respondent Hira said in her speech,

“I could not pay the house rent in the first month. My aunt lives here in this area. She has a tea shop. She lives alone here. She loves my children very much. She gave me a loan of 4500 BDT. I paid my room rent with that. Later I paid to her as well.”

These strong kinship ties helped workers to survive. Neighbors also helped each other a lot. Another interlocutor Hira described the situation:

"We are all sisters here. If there is no rice in my house, she will give it to me. I will return whenever she is in need. We don't have corona like rich people. We live together."

In other words, those with strong kin ties and social ties have largely been able to refrain from deciding to leave Dhaka during Covid. The habituation to Dhaka life itself makes the garment workers stay in Dhaka. However, examples of this practice are observed among the young, unmarried, and those with young children. From the discussion of the respondent Zarina who started working in a factory since she was only 14 years old, it was evident as to why she wanted to stay in Dhaka. She explained:

"I explained to my father and mother. We can go as soon as we get on the launch. But how many people are here? No one has died without eating. I like Dhaka. We are having hardships. But if I stay in Dhaka, I will get some work. Can I get job there? I told this to my parents. We had to suffer a lot. We had to starve. My father took a risk to work outside. But we didn't leave. And it was not the season to cultivate as well. What was the point of going to the village?"

Zarina decided to stay in Dhaka because of the hope of getting a job and the habit of living in Dhaka.

On the other hand, from the 17-year-old Rupa's conversation, a new story about Dhaka's life habit can be found. Rupa and her mother both work in garments. They came to Dhaka when Rupa was young. Rupa studied till class eight and then joined the garment industry. During covid her mother decided to go back home as they have all relatives in the village. However, Rupa did not want to go anywhere. Rupa explained:

"I have a life here. Everything is far away in the village. And I use a mobile. There is no good network. See I have a sound box. I listen to music. This cannot be done there. And garments will open. Sir said to me. I was waiting."



Apart from Rupa's familiarity with life in Dhaka, the distance created from village life is evident from her statement. Again, respondent Rehala's narrative is totally different from Zarina and Rupa. She wanted to stay in Dhaka to acclimatize her little one to Dhaka life. Rehala described her situation:

"My son is young. When I go to the village, I must take him too. I can't keep him here with someone else. And what will he do when he goes there? He studies here in a school. He will do mischief there all day long at the village. The villagers truant me as I work in Dhaka."

Thirdly, as some garment women come to Dhaka leaving their husbands and children in the village, some come to Dhaka for love and marriage. Despite the desire and opportunity, many people decided to stay in Dhaka instead of going to the village because of such reasons. Respondent Reshma's case is relevant in this regard.

#### **4.3.3 Getting New job in another sector and continue living in Dhaka**

Workers were at risky precarious situation when garments were called off during the Covid without giving them a month's salary or without telling them when they would reopen. Women workers who were single earners and whose savings were limited were the ones who faced the most glitches. They hesitated to take loans due to the void that was created in their social life. Those who did not join the trade unions had nothing to protest. If they decided to go for protest with the help of trade unions, due to internal politics, the workers would have to spend more money to fight. Because of this, most of the workers looked for jobs in other sectors without protesting when they lost their jobs. And this trend normalized the process of retrenchment of the workers. And during the Covid period, the level of layoffs increased manifold.

The layoffs were more troubling for the workers due to the lockdown, price volatility, and various mismanagements. In such a situation, leaving a job and getting a new job was undeniably difficult. And it was much more difficult for women workers. Female workers were laid off more than males. It also took a lot of time to get a job after being laid off. As the garments were closed due to lockdown, the situation became more complicated for them. In the informal sector, men have more job scope available than women. But social networks have helped many to find work. Among the respondents,

most of the women who lost their jobs in garments took up job as part time domestic worker in several household. And some had taken jobs in sub-contract factories for low wages. A respondent said, where she used to get Tk 12,000 to Tk 13,000 as a senior operator at the end of the month, she took a job with a salary of Tk 5,500.

Social hierarchy and status of working in several sectors was creating problems for the workers. Working in a construction site is highly gendered and it questions the status of the women who work there. One respondent Asma Begum said this:

“Don’t I have honor? This is your work. Will you work in the street? I also can’t. I will starve if I have to but why will I give my honor and work in the street (as a construction worker)?”

Similar attitude is observed among a few workers about working in another household as domestic workers. Interlocutor Nasima said this:

“My neighbor told me if I would be interested in working as she was about to leave that house and going to village. I denied her. Physical problems arise because of working in garments. Working as a helping hand won’t be possible for me. I don’t do my own household chores. My daughter does. Doing one thing continuously creates a pattern of stress for the body. My husband doesn’t want me to go either. I’m fine at home. Garments are like working in a home setting. You no need to go out.”

Respondent Nasima's husband was a driver, and he was getting his monthly salary during Covid. As a result, they did not feel the economic strain. On the other hand, the difficulty was different for respondent Shahana Khatun. Her husband died of kidney disease during pandemic. Unable to cope with the debt burden, she started working as a domestic worker. In Nasima’s words:

"People cannot say bad things. Many people work here. What else can I say? I have to bear my own risk. Who will feed me for a meal? Do I have time to think about honor when I get kicked in the stomach?"

In other words, garment workers who were financially disadvantaged have sought employment in other sectors. Seeking work in other sectors has served as a coping mechanism to cope with poverty and the pandemic. However, it should be noted that

even if social relations work as a coping mechanism, policy makers should pay attention to the gendered situation of the informal sector.

#### **4.3.4 Leaving Dhaka life behind and ‘returning’ home**

Leaving Dhaka and going to village was the last option that the RMG workers used as a coping mechanism during Covid. When garment workers decided to return to the village at that time, socio-economic factors were more influential than personal desire behind that decision. The purpose of going to Dhaka for most of the workers was to earn money and build wealth. Those who were unable to do that and not getting any help for survival, decided to go back. After returning there, they face numerous problems from community, society and individual level. This section has elaborated on those sufferings and their coping mechanism.

The main economic problem faced by garment workers after returning to villages was their inability to find new employment in the rural male-dominated workforce. When they went back as returnees, it was seen that there was no continuation of the work experience they had done in garments in the previous years. As a result, the skills they excelled in are lost. And the impact of the neoliberal economy adds a new dimension to this problem. The new types of informal sectors are emerging which are male-dominated and controlled. Only a few options are available like rearing domestic animals. Moslema explained:

"The difference is I have to run with goats. I need to search for goats all day. I don't like to do this. At least I liked doing work at garments. I will get the salary at the end of the month. I do not remember the pain that I had endured all month after getting salary. And my body was not like that. I was beautiful while I was working in the factory."

When workers leave work and return to the village, their social identity of theirs is reconstructed from the community level. Crossing the boundary of the village and going to Dhaka for work is not desirable for a village *bou* (bride). As a result, they not only return as village wives but also as garment workers. Hence when they enter the village vicinity, they are constructed as 'other' with respect to other village wives. Socially they become isolated which creates distance between social relationships.

#### **4.4 SDG and ‘leaving no one behind’: State of gender equality in the life of RMG workers at the time of pandemic**

Overall downsizing of female garment workers in Bangladesh RMG sector in recent years is a factor that deserve to be taken seriously into account. In secondary literature and in newspaper reports it was being noted even before the pandemic that the number of female workers in Bangladesh RMG sector was decreasing. In the 1990s, the percentage of female workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) was almost 90 percent. However, in the last 10 years or so, the figure has dropped down to less than 60 percent.

Over the last three decades, the export oriented RMG sector, alongside the NGO movement, has played a pivotal role in increasing female employment, and as a result, ensuring female empowerment in the country. This sudden drop is not only a worry in terms of female participation in the workforce, but also specifically for the RMG sector. The industry was built on the back of female workers, who, unfair as it was, gave the country a competitive edge over rivals because of lower wages and a disinclination to unionise.

Bangladeshi women have historically been champion in performing multiple roles at the same time. Intesar (2021) stated that significant level of well-being, empowerment, freedom and rational decision-making capacity are acquired by Bangladeshi women because of their participation in national economy. According to the Global Gender Gap 2020 report, Bangladesh was the top ranked among South Asian Countries to minimize gender gap<sup>i</sup>. But Covid-19 has notably thwarted progress in terms of gender parity. It has negatively impacted their physical, mental, and social life at the same time. When it comes to the ready-made garment workers, the impact has been worse.

Although the women workers make up the workforce by 50% to 60%, they are rarely seen to exercise their agency to show power and they are the lowest paid in the sector. During Covid period the autonomy, agency and subjectivity of the women workers

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/news/covid-19-step-back-women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-bangladesh>

have come under challenge in new ways. Because of this, their overall empowerment scenario has come under question. Working women's poverty status has deteriorated as well, and the increased burden has made them more vulnerable. The findings from group discussions and interview highlight this changed situation of women's empowerment and create ground form making an argument that gender equity has been comprised severely during pandemic and efforts to achieve sustainable development goals are likely to experience remarkable setback.

#### **4.4.1 The idea of 'empowerment' comes under challenge in new ways**

The advocates of development perspective promote the narrative that the women garments workers are the 'national hero' to maintain the capitalistic system as part of global supply chain. According to them, by joining garments women were contributing to poverty alleviation by increasing GDP and showing the way to solve unemployment problem. Again, as women entered the public sphere, overriding the social norms imposed on women in local sphere, women were thought to be emancipated and dependent. But this construction hides the struggle of women inside the garment.

Siddiqi (2000) expresses that the order that is created at the global level captures the national reality, but how women move at the local level does not come into the discussion. National expectations and aspirations are achieved through GDP growth, but at the individual and household level, women's lives become entangled in diverse forms of complexities which include both economic gains and emotional-relational anxieties. One narration can be added here that Nilofar – a woman garment worker made this observation after working in the factory for fourteen more hours:

"Working in a garment factory is more laboring than leaving us with adequate time to rest, and to recover from all tension, pressure, tiredness, exhaustion, mistreatment, and burns of insults. Whatever target we fulfill is not enough. Each day at the factory comes with a higher target. It repeats day after day. This is endless. This makes a weak body (*shorir durbol*). This has become a loop (*chakra*): the factory demands more, makes the body weaker and demand more from that weak body." (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019).

This vulnerable situation inside garment factories is not uncommon. They go to protest when they are left with no stone unturned. They don't go for negotiation at the first

place because of losing their job. Workers protest while they lose all their patience. By addressing and covering such protest, different parties represent such phenomena with women empowerment discourses while hiding their vulnerable state which evoke them to go for that. This is how empowerment discourses come to the fore without adequately depicting the actual scenario. During Covid, the lives of the women workers came under new challenges, that, in turn, created new social insecurities for them. The case of Sima Akhter is relevant here to unravel the practical challenges that the workers went through.

#### **4.4.2 Giving up to increased social pressure amid pandemic: The case of Sima Akhter**

Sima Akhter lives in a slum-like settlement in Kuturia area of Ashulia (under Savar sub-district). She lives with her in-laws. Her family consists of 10 members. She got married at the age of 14 and came to Dhaka from village. She had her first daughter one year after her marriage. Her husband was involved in gambling for which he was not in a state to support his family financially. Sima decided to join garments while her baby was 10 months old. She joined at a garment where her mother-in-law used to work before. Her basic was 8,500 BDT while she became an operator from helper after one year of joining. She decided not to have another baby as she had a huge responsibility of raising her daughter alone. She started saving money to buy land in her village which is why she didn't contribute to her in-laws.

At the time of COVID-19, when factories were closed, Sima's in-laws started to put pressure on her to have another child. Especially they were expecting a son. She didn't agree initially. Quarrels became frequent within the household. She tried to defend herself by saying that her husband was not earning any income. However, her mother-in-law kept on creating pressure on her particularly by referring to the money that she had saved for years. The mother-in-law argued that the savings were enough to raise two children without even knowing how much money Sima had saved.

Sima explained to them that she hardly saved money as her husband tortured her and took away a big part of the saving. However, the in-laws did not believe her. At one point, she was tired of fighting and decided to have a child. Because of working at a garment, she was having long term urine infection and she started to have

complications while she was pregnant. She had to go for a C-section which cost her all the money that she had saved. She then had no money of her own. Even though factories are open now, she is not physically capable to join in the intensive work that factory would require her to do. She currently faces domestic violence as she is unable to help her husband financially.

Empowerment refers to the process of showing agency while making decision. The fourth sustainable development goal (SDG-4) advocates for gender equity which aims to make empower women by challenging and ending existing forms of discrimination. Discourses of empowerment which connotes self-sufficiency at the local level may create disruption to the notion of gender equity by creating challenges that are not suitable for the specific context. This is what we can infer from the case of Sima Akhter: discourses of empowerment that have been represented from global to state levels might not have straightforward helpful consequences. Since ‘out of the place’ understandings of agency and empowerment might not have proper connection to local level realities, such expectation might not give the workers necessary social protection and might put them under increased insecurity. It may bring forward new and uncomprehensible challenges for women. According to a report of UN Women, all types of violence against women and girls especially domestic violence has deepened during Covid period<sup>i</sup>. Sima Akhter’s case brings this complexity to light.

#### **4.4.3 The politics of stigmatizing urban poor: Increased marginality of women garment workers**

Covid situation has caused severe and diversified impacts on marginalized groups. While Bangladesh was trying to deal with the surge of Covid cases, it was also generating aggravated severe social exclusion for those who were already marginalized or were in socially precarious positions. As one study showed, 59% of vulnerable non-poor living in slums went down to poverty line during Covid and 24.5 million people of them were identified as ‘new poor’ (Rahman et al. 2022). Several national and non-governmental organizations started providing incentive packages considering the

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<sup>i</sup> <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/covid-19-wreaking-havoc-on-bangladeshs-poor-a-story-of-food-cash-and-health-crises/>

situation in those slum areas. But not much recovery was noted during the early or later Covid recovery stage (Rahman et al. 2022).

A large portion of garment workers live in those areas for their temporal living in Dhaka city and its suburban areas such as Ashulia and Savar. Living in a slum or scattered settlement is always challenging. Congested and shared rooms, unhygienic environment, lack of safe gas connections, inadequate electric and water supply systems, hazardous solid waste dumping systems are some of the issues that made their lives vulnerable (Sharmin and Matsuyuki, 2020). During Covid, their vulnerability as a ‘new poor’ living in a slum area has intensified. The case of Shahana Khatun – as described below – can give us understanding about diverse dimensions of such increased vulnerability.

#### **4.4.4 Increased work burden of female garment workers at the time of crisis: ‘Triple burden’ and beyond**

When the managerial and ‘affective’ work of society is combined with the productive and reproductive duties of women, it is identified as ‘triple burden’. Authors address this concept while highlighting gender analysis. Nawaz and McLaren (2016) in their write-up infer that women’s participation in productive work is thought to be as routine and less valued and visible in comparison to men. On the other hand, reproductive work is thought to be performed by women and is usually understood as non-monetized, hidden and discursively cast as not “real work” (Delaney and Macdonald 2018). In respect to productive and reproductive work, societal and emotional activities are also performed by women which are seen as voluntary. Even though women carry out these duties with much physical and emotional commitment, these are acknowledged most of the time as undervalued. Women's participation in these three spheres casts a burden on them and makes their life more exposed, fragile and anxious.

Initiatives taken from development perspective address the triple burden of gender and as for interventions for socially situated ways of empowering women. But what is missing in such interventions is that while performing such activities women experience worsening of their overall wellbeing. Disease outbreak, disaster or other crisis increases these workloads for women which makes women’s inability to balance their time among such spheres. According to McLaren et al. (2020), at the time of Covid-



19, women's burdens across all spheres has increased a lot and these were not only heavier, but also more dangerous for women of all domains. Authors undertook a gender analysis from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Australia. They argued that women's reproductive burdens have been perpetuated, reinforced, and increased in the context of Covid 19. In case of Bangladesh, the situation has not been different, rather it has been found out that COVID-19 perpetuated vulnerability as well as adding new burden which made women even more vulnerable.

#### **4.5 'Democratizing' social space and reforming social institutions: The issue of making the social protection intervention more effective**

Covid situation has caused severe and diversified impacts on marginalized groups. While Bangladesh was trying to deal with the surge of Covid cases, it was also generating aggravated severe social exclusion for those who were already marginalized or were in socially precarious positions. As one study showed, 59% of vulnerable non poor living in slums went down to poverty line during Covid and 24.5 million people of them were identified as 'new poor' (Rahman et al. 2022). Several national and non-governmental organizations started providing incentive packages considering the situation in those slum areas. But not much recovery was noted during the early or later Covid recovery stage (Rahman et. al. 2022).

The government announced incentive package during pandemic period when garments were at the verge of shutting down, due to non-payment of wages and strained relationship between workers and owners. That announcement of 5000 million incentives temporarily stabilized workers and employers. But evidence from the statements of the respondents showed that there was unbalanced distribution of these incentives. Incentives were used in many ways. Some factories offered incentives to pay due. Even if for most of the workers due was 10,000 BDT or more, they were given only 5000 BDT. Many claim that acquaintances of powerful factory administrators have received more than 5000 as incentives in some factories. There have been cases where they have received incentives three times or five times by submitting different NID cards.

The narratives presented by the workers enforced this understanding that the informal economy that the neoliberal economy ushers in creates different forms of precarity as it exposes, deepens, and reproduces the existing inequalities. Rural women have always had a challenging situation in terms of mobility in the workplace. However, women in particular classes have overcome that challenge and entered the workplace at various times in pursuit of livelihood. But it's not only about getting into the workplace or questioning the rural structure. Garment workers cannot get out of this circle when they are in the city, neither can they get out of the circle when she returns to the village. As a result, she is forced to spend her life through diverse and uneven forms of struggles.

The findings of this study highlight the marginality and vulnerability of the garment workers which aggravated significantly at the time of COVID-19. Bangladesh's state and society must be more caring about the plight of the workers who are the 'backbone' of the country's main economic sector. As we have shown through different case studies, the workers face diverse forms of insecurities, and they try to cope with intensified precarities in the absence of strong support from state and factory owners. Factory jobs do not provide them with adequate earnings and savings that they can use at the time of adversities and crisis. They live within the perennial threats of getting back to the state of impoverishment and hardship. The narratives presented in this chapter make a strong case for extensive policy support for the garment workers.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has shown that vulnerabilities and precarities of garments workers of Bangladesh have not been taken adequately on board while the SSNP and other social protection measures are conceived, outlined and implemented. The responsibility of the state is not only to bring economic growth and prosperity by creating job opportunities but also to ensure professional, social and human security of the workers to enhance the quality of life and wellbeing of them. This needs to be recognized adequately and should be reflected in government's policies and programmes.

### **Looking beyond wage-centric narrative and valuing workers' life**

The issues relating to low wage, unsafe work environment and other professional irregularities are much-discussed issues as regards the life of the garment's workers of Bangladesh. However, the wage-centric or work-place environment narratives do not shed adequate light on other significant human aspects of workers' socially situated lives. There is no denying the fact that the workers' wages must be raised as they are unjustly low paid considering the time and effort that they put into the production process. But focusing on workers' socially situated life would mean that they would need support and care with regards to recognition of their contribution, non-discrimination, dignity, security, non-violence, human rights, health, education, childcare, conjugal peace, and other relationally shaped aspects of meaningful life.

### **Special attention to gendered experience of women garment workers**

The women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector face much aggravated situation in their workplace and social life. As capitalism has driven women out of the house, their cheap labour has been appropriated by the production regime that cleverly reproduce the patriarchal norms and subject women to gendered forms of exploitation and violence. To provide safeguard and security to women work is needed to ensure that the spirit of gender parity – which is among the core focal areas of SDGs – is achieved.

### **SDGs and the wellbeing of Bangladesh garment workers**

One of the central tenets of SDGs is a 'whole-of-society' approach. A 'whole-of-society' approach means that corporate bodies, civil society actors, society and state

will have to be inclusive and just. On the other hand, by focusing on ‘leaving no one behind’ the SDGs highlight that public policies are to be sensitive toward social exclusion and adverse inclusion. Garment workers’ inclusion in the capitalist system is based on unjust and adverse settlements that need to be worked on to bring about the principles of social justice and human rights. The covid time situation presented in this work accentuates that the state, society and market have to recognize that risks and insecurities of the workers and policies have to be reframed accordingly.

### **Expanding the idea of protection and security and providing SSNP support to the garment workers**

This study makes a clear-cut case for greater inclusion of garment workers in state supported social protection and security frameworks. The SSNP that are currently at place in Bangladesh do not adequately account for urban and semi-urban based working-class people. Whereas garment workers live under the chronic threats of slipping back to the condition of impoverishment and destitution, the state and society must expand its support network by expanding and reframing the SSNPs.

### **Increasing job security and ensuring market/corporate accountability**

The jobs of the garment workers are neither formal nor fully secure and protected. Their vulnerability and precarity have their own features which must be understood with regards to neoliberalism and the dominant market tendency toward executing ‘primitive accumulation’. The state policies and programmes must take this into active consideration: the inequalities and injustices emanating from the capitalist production system cannot be left unchecked and unaddressed. The workers cannot be put beyond social protection interventions on the grounds that the factory owners or market system would adequately take care of them. There must be specially tailored professional and social security arrangements for safeguarding the vulnerabilities – or the possibilities of slipping downward - of the garment workers, and this safeguarding would contribute to provide them some support at the time emergencies such as outbreak of Covid-19 or even in ‘normal’ time. The highlighted conclusions have not emerged from the researcher’s field level data. These are simply general recommendations – does not carry any weight for this research.

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