

# **THE WORLD OF WORK AMID COVID PANDEMIC IN BANGLADESH: TRADE UNIONS' STRATEGIC ACTION PRIORITIES**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 Pandemic has profoundly affected and continue to impact Bangladesh's economy along with its labour market. The pandemic led shutdown and/or slowdown of economic activities impacted the income and livelihoods of the working people. A large number of people either lost employment or income and many are also experiencing intense job insecurity and uncertainty. According to a CPD-BILS joint study, as a result of the epidemic coronavirus, 1.5 crore people have become poor in the country.<sup>1</sup> More than three percent of the country's total workforce has lost their jobs. The study also claims that 7.8 % of those who lost their jobs were engaged in informal activities in urban areas, and 69% of people working in the informal sectors in urban areas are at risk of losing their jobs. The maximum number of people involved in small and medium enterprises is likely to be unemployed. Four lakh migrant workers lost their jobs in the first wave of Corona from March to September 2020.<sup>2</sup> No doubt, immense pain, suffering and anxiety for people have been caused.

Country's largest export earning sector – ready-made garments is of no exception. Rampant cancellation or suspension of order by international buyers and brands pushed millions of workers towards uncertainty. Many have lost their job or shifted to substandard job. The income loses has pushed many workers into poverty. An estimate shows that due to order cancellation and delayed payment, the industry lost \$4.33 billion worth of exports from March to June.<sup>3</sup> The unforeseen crisis led to factory closures, lay-off, workers' termination, and delay in wage payment. Social dialogue practiced during the covid-19 period in the ready-made garment sector reveals that bipartite and tripartite negotiations held between the social dialogue partners led to discussions on the crisis, including factory shutdowns, lay-off, workers' termination, and delay in wage payment, but the proposals dealing with crisis by the workers representatives had not been properly addressed, and the decisions taken in the forums were not fully enforced.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident that over .35 million workers lost their jobs in the garment factories in 2020 as factories went for lay-offs and closures.<sup>5</sup> The factory shutdown and lay off, termination of workers, and delayed wage payment also caused labour unrest in the sector. According to DIFE, from early March to 17 September 2020, labor unrest happened in 90 factories.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Labour Studies and Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2021, 'Impact of Covid-19 on the Labour Market: Policy Proposals for Trade Union on Employment, Gender and Social Security for Sustainable Recovery', April 2021, Dhaka: BILS and CPD

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> *The Financial Express*, *RMG export earnings in July 1-18 total \$1.57b*, (20 July 2020). Retrieved from: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/rmg-export-earnings-in-july-1-18-total-157b-1595218398>

<sup>4</sup> Jakir Hossain and Afroza Akter, 2020, *Mapping Social Dialogue in Apparel: Bangladesh*, School of Industrial Labour Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca: ILR, January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Pandemic wipes out 3.57 lakh apparel jobs, *The Daily Star*, February 15, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

To protect livelihoods and the economy during the lockdown, the government has adopted a range of monetary and fiscal policies. Yet, the working poor are out of the reach of social protection schemes, and continue to live in the economic vulnerability exacerbated by the corona pandemic crisis. The evidence highlighting increased risks of working women and men — both informal and formal sectors in Bangladesh lead to urgency of practical options to recover better, and to accelerate the transition to a more inclusive, and sustainable and resilient world for the working women and men. There is the recognition that the workers and business, and economy face a particularly uncertain future as there are stark consequences of COVID-19 in an already precarious world of work.

Employment and decent work are central to reducing poverty, achieving Bangladesh's development goals, and fostering equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. While unemployment and inequitable labour market outcomes remain high, labour markets in Bangladesh continue to be characterized by high level of underemployment, vulnerable employment and precarious work—not sufficiently generating full and productive employment and decent work for all, a major target to achieve sustainable development goals.

In line with the focus on decent and productive employment, how Bangladesh can emerge from this crisis stronger, together, with better jobs and a more equal future is the long-felt questions to be addressed. What strategic vision and actions necessary for Bangladesh's trade union movement to achieve such goals is the focus of the paper.

To place employment and decent work at the centre of growth and development strategies of the country, this study focuses on the growth and development patterns pre and during crisis, challenges, and strategic framework for ensuring decent work for all. This paper formulates adequate inclusive development strategies for full productive employment and decent work by reviewing current growth and development trajectories and employment dynamics of the country, and by juxtaposing policy and institutional frameworks available for promoting inclusive growth with the required distributional changes for ensuring decent work for all.

The approach for this study is participatory in nature including representatives of trade unions in identifying the challenges in the development process as well as in articulating the strategic directions the labour movement may take on. It applies qualitative research approach and has collected data from range of focus group discussions and key informant interviews (see Annex for a list of discussants) along with secondary literature review.

The paper is presented in four core sections. The following section provides the Covid 19 consequences to Bangladesh economy and the world of work. The third section looks into the country's responses to Covid pandemic. The fourth section identifies Bangladesh's development priorities, and in line with that articulates the intervention areas of the world of work. The final section, in lieu of conclusion, provides guidance for trade unions on ensuring a strategic direction for full and productive employment and decent work for all amid corona pandemic.

## 2. COVID 19 CONSEQUENCES TO BANGLADESH ECONOMY AND THE WORLD OF WORK

### Health crisis led economic and livelihood crises

Bangladesh has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A first wave of infections started in March with an initial peak in early July 2020. A national shutdown implemented from March to May 2020 to contain domestic transmission. Movement restrictions were progressively lifted from June 2020 onward and mobility returned to pre-pandemic levels by October 2020. Incidence and transmission rates have declined since August 2020 till March 2021. The persistence of new infections in April 2021 suggests that transmission of the virus remains an ongoing challenge.

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress over the past three decades, lifting millions out of poverty and sustaining expanding levels of economic growth. Expanding levels of economic growth has led to a rise in Bangladesh's gross national income from \$928 in FY 2011 to \$2227 in FY 2020. The country gained lower middle-income status in 2015 and met the United Nations eligibility criteria to graduate from the least developed country status (LDC) in March 2018 with graduation to be effective in 2026.

Over the past 25 years, Bangladesh has more than halved its incidence of poverty. The country's economy grew by an average of 6.9% from fiscal year (FY) 2011 to FY2019 and, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, expanded by an estimated 5.2% in FY2020. Poverty incidence both in terms of upper and lower poverty lines has over the years been reduced. These achievements have been realized despite major internal and external challenges, including global economic downturns, natural disasters, and periods of political uncertainty. But, the shutdown of the economy along with the subsequent slowdown of economic activities have resulted in severe supply-side disruptions in all sectors of the economy. GDP growth decelerated sharply, down to an estimated 2.4 percent in FY20. Industrial growth slowed, including a sharp decline in readymade garment (RMG) manufacturing output.<sup>7</sup>

Apparel production fell by 16.8 percent in FY20 as international orders were suspended. The leather sector experienced significant production disruptions. During the first half of FY20, the expansion of the construction sector stalled, as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, and the growth of bank advances to the sector fell 2.1 percent in FY20 (from 15.8 percent in FY19).<sup>8</sup> In the first half of FY21, manufacturing production recovered as RMG export orders were being reinstated and construction activity rose as the implementation of infrastructure megaprojects resumed.

Service sector growth also decelerated due to disruptions in transport, retail, hotels, and restaurants. Agricultural output however was boosted by a robust rice harvest in FY20 but was dampened by losses from flooding in FY21. Food grain production increased by 2.6 percent in

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<sup>7</sup> World Bank, Bangladesh Development Update: Moving Forward: Connectivity and Logistics to Strengthen Competitiveness April 2021, Dhaka: World Bank

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit.

FY20, thanks to a bumper harvest of aman rice and a productive boro harvest, despite cyclone Amphan and COVID19 related disruptions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Pre-existing Labour Market Vulnerabilities**

Bangladesh has a working-age population (between 15 and 65 years) of 109.1 million persons, representing 67.6 per cent of population, were aged 15 or older, of whom 55 million (50.4 per cent) were female. The total population aged 15 or older living in urban areas reached 32.0 million (70.7 per cent). In rural areas, the total population aged 15 or older was 77.1 million (29.3 per cent).<sup>10</sup>

The 2016-17 LFS shows that the total number of labour force increased from 56.7 million in 2010 to 63.5 million in 2017—an increase by 6.8 million in seven years or nearly by one million each year. According to LFS, the number of employed persons rose by 6.7 million between 2010 and 2017 or by about 0.96 million on average every year. The total working age population rose by 14.7 million in 2016-17 from the preceding year. In contrast, the employed population increased only by 0.7 million according to LFS 2016-17 from the preceding year.

The lack of job opportunities for the large pool of working age population is also clearly discernible from the employment prospects in the country estimated with the assumption that 1 per cent GDP growth creates employment for 0.25 million.<sup>11</sup> With the current growth trajectory about 2 million (1.97 million in Fy 2018) jobs are locally created, thus leaving the large pool of working age population in the ranks of unemployed and underemployed or they look for jobs abroad as migrant workers.

The labour force survey (LFS 2016) finds an estimated 2.7 million persons aged 15 or older to be unemployed.<sup>12</sup> According to LFS 2010 the rate of unemployment stood at 4.6 percent in 2010 but has a slight decline in 2016-17 making it 4.2 percent, which was 4.3 percent in 1999-2000. By sex, the number of unemployed males is 1.4 million, compared with 1.3 million unemployed females.<sup>13</sup> Both the rates of unemployment for male and female have increased, and it was 3.0 for male and 6.8 for female in 2015-16 but now 3.1 and 6.7 respectively in 2016-17. A total of 0.9 million persons in urban areas and 1.8 million persons in rural areas are unemployed.<sup>14</sup> The LFS places the unemployment rate at 4.2 per cent, which is 3.1 per cent for males and 6.7 per cent for females. By area, more rural-based persons are unemployed, at 4 per cent, than urban-based persons, at 3.9 per cent.

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<sup>9</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Labour Force Survey, 2016-17

<sup>11</sup> General Economics Division, *Bangladesh State of the Economy*, January 2019.

<sup>12</sup> The standard definition of unemployment is based on the three criteria: "without work", "currently available for work" and "seeking work". The definition includes underemployment (all employed people whose working time is insufficient in relation to an alternative employment situation in which the person is willing and available to be engaged). Of all employed people who worked less than 40 hours in a week in the country in 2015-16, an estimated 1.8 million employed people (3.0 per cent) were looking for new/additional jobs. Among the underemployed people, 1.2 million are employed males (2.8 per cent) and 0.6 million are employed females (3.4 per cent) (QLFS 2015-16).

<sup>13</sup> Labour Force Survey, 2016-17

<sup>14</sup> Labour Force Survey, 2016-17



Of the unemployed population, 1.36 million are youth, aged 15–24 years (50.8 per cent) and 1.32 million are adults, aged 25+ years (49.2 per cent). The absolute number of unemployed females (1.33 million) is almost same as male counterparts (1.35 million). There are far more unemployed persons in rural areas (1.81 million) than in urban areas (0.87 million).

Of the employed population, only 14.9 percent is in formal sector and 85.1 percent in informal sector. Among the total population, 17.9 percent and 82.1 percent were male in the formal sector and informal sector respectively. For female, 8.2 percent and 91.8 percent were involved in the formal sector and informal sector respectively.<sup>15</sup> The LFS survey 2016-17 finds about 85.1 per cent of the total employed persons aged 15 or older in informal employment, while only 14.9 per cent are in formal employment. The informal economy tends to absorb most of the growth in the labour force, and plays a major role in employment creation and income generation for vast majority.

There exists urban-rural variation in employment by formal and informal sector. In the urban area, 22.7 percent workers were involved in the formal sector compared to 11.9 percent in the rural area. In the urban area, 77.3 percent was involved in the informal sector compared to 88.1 percent in the rural area in 2017.

In rural areas, 88.0 per cent of the employed are in informal sector employment whereas it was 77.3 percent in urban areas. In rural areas, 93.3 per cent of the females are in informal sector employment whereas it was 87.3 per cent in urban areas. At the national level, only 8.2 per cent females engaged in formal employment and it was 14.9 per cent for the male counter parts.

The findings of the labour force survey also show that with no level of education, a large number of employed persons are engaged in the informal employment at 94.4 per cent and only at 5.6 per cent in the formal employment. By age group, 89.2 per cent of the youths aged 15-29 are engaged in the informal employment, and 83.0 percent of the adult aged 30-64 is in the informal employment.<sup>16</sup>

According to the LFS 2016-17, informal employment incidence was highest in Agriculture sector (95.4 per cent of the total employment in that sector), Industry sector (89.9 per cent of total employment in that sector) and service sector (71.8 per cent of total employment in that sector).

Moreover, the engagement of female in agricultural sector remained as the highest position in broad economic sector. Of the total employed person, 40.6 percent are engaged in agricultural sector followed by 39.0 percent in service sector and 20.4 percent in industrial sector.

Besides this, for male, the highest 31.8 percent is engaged in the service sector followed by agricultural (22.3 percent) and industrial (15.3 percent) sectors, whereas for female, the highest 18.3 percent is engaged in agricultural sector followed by service sector (7.2 percent) and industrial sector (5.2 percent).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Labour Force Survey, 2016-17

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Op. cit

Of the employed, a large number of child labour exists. According to Bangladesh National Child Labour Survey 2013, there are 3,450,369 working children and of which child labour is 1698,894 and for 1,280,195 children's work is termed hazardous.

Also, Bangladesh is, partly due to its population size, one of the world's top emigrant countries, with over 5 million migrants abroad, and a net migration rate of one out of 250 inhabitants.

The status in employment distinguishes between the two main categories of the employed: (1) employees and (2) the self-employed. According to the LFS, the largest share of the employed population (44.3 per cent) work as own-account workers, followed by (39.1 per cent) as employees and contributing family workers (11.5 per cent). Between the sexes by largest share, there are more males in all categories except among contributing family workers, where there are more than three times employed females (5.3 million) than employed males (1.7 million).

Alarming trend is that the number of unpaid family worker increased in a large volume over the years. The rate of growth of unpaid family worker was much higher compared to the rate of growth of total labour force during the period of 1999-2000 to 2010. Annual rate of growth for unpaid worker at national level was 9.64 percent, whereas the growth of total labour force during the same period was only 3.37 percent. In 2010, 11.8 million unpaid family workers were active in labour market, whereas only 4.7 million was involved in 1999-2000. Therefore, 7.1 million (increased by 151 percent) unpaid family workers have been added to the labour market during the same period. If differed by gender in 1999-2000, 42.55 percent of the unpaid family workers were male compared to 57.45 percent of female among the unpaid family worker.

This portion was only 22.88 percent for male and 77.12 percent for female during 2010. Therefore, unpaid female family worker increased at a significant rate (237 percent) compared to male (only 35.0 percent).<sup>18</sup>

Gender wage gap exists. In some occupations, such as craft and related trade workers, elementary occupations and agriculture workers, the difference in earnings between the sexes is wide. Also, the differences of earnings in terms of skills level are clearly visible—elementary occupations earn 4 to 5 times less than the professionals.

In Bangladesh, a large share of the population work in low income waged jobs. Regulations exist on maximum working hours; however, these are routinely violated. Minimum wages are also too low to meet the living cost. The country also has a rising trend of precarious and casual forms of employment. Wages of casual workers are around two-fifth of regular workers. Working hours are also long for most workers, with 52% working more than 48 hours per week.<sup>19</sup> Safety conditions at workplaces are poor, and high unemployment rates make it risky for workers to lose their job if complaining.

Workers are often oblivious to their rights and have such low knowledge of working conditions that they themselves do not realize how dangerous their jobs are. Due to tradition and an extremely poor implementation of the labour legislation nothing has compelled employers to

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<sup>18</sup> *Labour Force Survey, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2016-17, and BBS, Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2015-16*

<sup>19</sup> LFS 206-17

grant decent working conditions to their employees. Often workers are forced to carry out long working hours and hazardous work due to their long deprivation and vulnerability.

### **Effect on the Jobs, Livelihoods, and Well-being**

The substantial gains in household incomes and poverty reduction achieved over the past two decades have been put at risk by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has severely impacted jobs and earnings and caused poverty to rise in FY20. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that 13 million working-age men and women were unemployed; a figure that has significantly increased during the current crisis.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, an estimated 64.4 million Bangladeshis work in informal employment, which represents almost 95 per cent of total employment. The International Labour Organization estimates that almost all of them (63.5 million) have been significantly affected by the crisis and are at considerable risk of suffering losses to their livelihoods.<sup>21</sup>

The existing jobless GDP growth before the pandemic was further reduced from 8.15% in FY18-19 to 5.24% in FY 19-20 as against expected 8.61%. Resultant impact has been on the poverty incidences. Fall of poverty rate declined and created new poor. The World Bank estimated that the upper poverty rate, based on the national poverty line, reached 30 percent of the population (7 percentage points above a non-COVID scenario).<sup>22</sup> A recent study conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development suggests that the economic shock induced by the pandemic has pushed 2.45 crore people, a whopping 14.75 percent of the country's population into poverty in one year.<sup>23</sup> Participation Research Centre and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development conducted another survey in April 2020, and found that around 3.7 crore people or 22 percent of the population became the "new poor" due to the first wave of the pandemic. It meant that they joined the previous 20.5 percent of the population who had already been poor.<sup>24</sup>

The pandemic has reversed the country's steady trend of poverty reduction over the past two decades. Widespread losses in employment and labor earnings caused a significant increase in poverty. The sharp decline in demand for manufactured goods, particularly from the export-oriented Ready-Made Garments sector, has affected employment creation in urban areas, an important driver of poverty reduction in the past.<sup>25</sup> PPRC and BIGD 3<sup>rd</sup> round survey found that the pandemic caused a significant depletion of households' income and forced a large number of the population into leaving cities and taking shelter in their village homes. Those people had to head home as they became jobless, their situation was worsened by rising living expenses,

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<sup>20</sup> ILO Bangladesh, *Social protection in Bangladesh*, retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Areasofwork/social-protection/lang--en/index.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Macro-Poverty Outlook (April 2021), World Bank: Washington D.C.

<sup>23</sup> Rahman, H.Z and Matin, I, 2021, Poverty Dynamics and Household Realities, One Year into the COVID-19 Crisis, PPRC-BIGD 3<sup>rd</sup> Round Survey, April 2021, Dhaka: PPRC and BIGD

<sup>24</sup> PPRC-BIGD 2nd Rapid Response Research Livelihoods, Coping and Recovery During COVID-19 Crisis, October 2020, Dhaka, PPRC and BIGD

<sup>25</sup> Hill, Ruth, and Maria Eugenia Genoni. 2019. Bangladesh Poverty Assessment: Facing Old and New Frontiers in Poverty Reduction. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

dwindling savings and mounting debt.<sup>26</sup> In addition, large labor-income losses are evidenced for households engaged in informal services and labor-intensive sectors like construction and transport, due to slower demand and social-distancing measures. Unemployment rate increased 10 times from 2.3% in March 2020 to 22.39% in July 2020.

Official unemployment rate in Bangladesh is around 4% and every year around 2.2 million educated unemployed are being added to this list. Unemployment rate is reported to have increased by 10 times from 2.3% in March 2020 to 22.4% in July 2020. Among the employed people, over 86% of them are in the informal sector. According to Ali and Bhuiyan (2020), a large number of people have recently become jobless while many more are at the danger of losing jobs. Particularly, the poor segment of the population who have very small or no saving at all is the worst victim of the economic slowdown. A study indicates that during shutdown, an estimated job loss was 4.47 million jobs in construction, retail, transport, food, and 5.19 million in informal jobs, and 0.9 million in manufacturing sector totaling to 10.56 million job loss.<sup>27</sup> In subsequent pandemic period, a recent BILS-CPD study puts the number as jobless as 16.38 million, indicating that about 3% of total labour force have lost jobs.<sup>28</sup>

The country's largest export earning sector—ready-made garments—too was dealt a devastating blow. An estimate by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) shows that, due to cancellation of orders and delayed payments, the industry lost \$4.33 billion worth of exports between March and June.<sup>29</sup> This extensive cancellation or suspension of orders by international buyers and brands has pushed millions of garment workers—many of whom are women—into dire financial situations. The unforeseen crisis of Covid, and the subsequent reactions by international buyers, led to factory closures, lay-offs, workers' termination, and delays in wage payment. According to a report by the Centre of Policy Dialogue (CFD), 357,450 workers were laid off or terminated due to Covid.<sup>30</sup> A study by Penn State University's Center for Global Workers Rights and the Worker Rights Consortium reported that more than one million garment workers were fired or furloughed, 72 percent without severance pay.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rahman, H.Z and Matin, I, 2021, Poverty Dynamics and Household Realities, One Year into the Covid-19 Crisis, PPRC-BIGD 3<sup>rd</sup> Round Survey, April 2021, Dhaka: PPRC and BIGD

<sup>27</sup> Islam R, (2020), Assessing the Impacts of COVID-19 on Employment in Bangladesh A Pathway to Inclusive and Sustainable Recovery, Keynote presentation at the webinar on "Impact of COVID on employment and vulnerability of workers with special focus on formal and informal types of workers: A pathway towards an inclusive and sustainable way forward" organized by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, 20 July 2020

<sup>28</sup> Institute of Labour Studies and Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2021, 'Impact of Covid-19 on the Labour Market: Policy Proposals for Trade Union on Employment, Gender and Social Security for Sustainable Recovery', April 2021, Dhaka: BILS and CPD

<sup>29</sup> The Financial Express, RMG export earnings in July 1-18 total \$1.57b, (20 July 2020). Retrieved from: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/rmg-export-earnings-in-july-1-18-total-157b-1595218398>

<sup>30</sup> CPD *Vulnerability, Resilience and Recovery in the RMG Sector in view of COVID Pandemic: Findings from the Enterprise Survey* Retrieved from <https://cpd.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Presentation-on-Vulnerabilities-Resilience-and-Recovery-in-the-RMG-Enterprises-.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Anner, Mark, Abandoned? The Impact of Covid-19 on Workers and Businesses at the Bottom of Global Garment Supply Chains, Center for Global Workers Rights, Penn State University, and the Worker Rights Consortium, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.workersrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Abandoned-Penn-State-WRC-Report-March-27-2020.pdf>

The official statistics differ. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) prepared crisis report which provides information on the number of RMG factories shutdowns and terminated and lay-off workers during the COVID-19 crisis (from mid-March till September 17, 2020) (see Table 2.1). According to the report, 90 thousand workers lost their jobs as a result of order cancellation or delayed payment; among them 43,049 workers (in 117 factories) have lost their jobs due to factory shutdown, 23,560 workers have been terminated from 75 factories, and 23,523 workers of 26 factories have been laid off.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the loss of income has been devastating, pushing many further into poverty.

**Table 2.1: Area wise RMG Factories shut-down, and terminated and lay-off workers**

Area	Factory shut down		Terminated		Lay-off	
	Factories	Workers	Factories	Workers	Factories	Workers
Dhaka	41	11568	18	5111	7	11944
Gazipur	25	18892	48	17162	14	7983
Narayanganj	11	2180	6	698	2	1229
Chottogram	24	3955	-	-	1	1100
Mymensingh	13	6000	-	-	2	1267
Cumilla	1	250	-	-	-	-
Narsingdi	2	564	3	589	-	-
Total	117	43049	75	23560	26	23523

Source: DIFE 2020.<sup>33</sup>

The crisis led factory shutdown, lay-off, workers' termination, and delay in wage payment resulted in labor unrest in the sector. According to DIFE, from early March to 17 September 2020, labor unrest happened in 90 factories.<sup>34</sup> As all labor unrests are not reported to the DIFE, the print media reported cases are higher. During the early Covid period (from March to June 2020), a total of 93 cases of labor unrest arose in the RMG sector, of which the highest number of such cases was reported in May 2020 (57 such cases in May, while labor unrest in March, April, and June were 11, 7, and 18 respectively).<sup>35</sup> The most common form of labor unrest included rallies, demonstration, human chain, roadblock, absent from work, confinement of authority, and hunger strike. An analysis of causes of labor unrest during the corona crisis reveals that most of the unrest was for either linked to demands of due wage and allowances (53 % of unrest) or against factory shut down, lay-off and termination of workers (18%).<sup>36</sup>

### **Disproportionate impacts on precarious employment**

The impacts fell disproportionately on those who were already in precarious circumstances. Two groups who stand out in terms of heavily hit. First, the sectors with physical interaction are hardly hit, in particular these include construction, informal service, transport, petty self-

<sup>32</sup> Crisis report September 17, prepared by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. (DIFE), 2020

<sup>33</sup> Crisis report till September 17, prepared by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. (DIFE), 2020

<sup>34</sup> DIFE 2020, Ibid

<sup>35</sup> BILS database on labor related media reports, 2020

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

employment, retail trade, food service. Second, millions of workers who have lost their livelihoods– especially women (current labour force participation rate 36% against men’s 81%) , informal economy workers, casual and temporary workers, young workers (12.8% unemployed as against national rate of 4.4%), older workers,; migrant workers (around 12.2 million), micro-entrepreneurs and the self-employed.

The crises exposed the pre-existing vulnerabilities before pandemic, that had been a source of concern, particularly for working poor. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, a large share of the population – 8 in 10 Bangladeshis – were poor or vulnerable to falling into poverty, income losses due to COVID-19 pushed those large shares of the population into poverty. PPRC-BIGD study shows that extreme poor households faced a loan burden amounting to Tk42,499 on average in March 2021, which was Tk22,429 in February last year. Up to March, the average loan of extreme poor households increased by 89%, while it increased by 98% for moderate poor and 86% for vulnerable non-poor households.<sup>37</sup>

A substantial part of vulnerability arose for people living in urban areas. a large share of Bangladeshi workers and their households depend on activities that are being directly affected by the crisis, i.e., by physical engagement as in transportation, in hotel and restaurant, and mostly for the service sector. The urban poor have been hit the hardest, with urban households being forced to cut food expenditure by 17 percent during the pandemic, and with informal loans of urban households increasing by 86 percent. What is even more concerning is that these same people are now facing the same hardships in the current lockdown as a result of the second wave of the pandemic, without having fully recovered from the first.

While workers in certain vulnerable activities have been more affected, the differential impacts for women are also related to their engagement in highly impacted sectors, such as garments and in domestic work. In addition, households engaged in informal services and labor-intensive activities such as construction workers, rickshaw pullers, day labourers and owners of small grocery stores had been in a great danger of income losses due to slower demand and social distancing measures.<sup>38</sup> It is estimated that COVID-19 has pushed 16.5 million people mainly rickshaw-pullers, transport workers, day labourers, street-vendors, hawkers, construction labourers and the employees of hotel, motel and restaurants back into poverty.<sup>39</sup> Another study found that 20 million people who solely rely on the informal sector jobs for their livelihood have already lost their jobs and become temporarily unemployed due to the measures taken by the government to contain the spread of the corona disease virus.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Rahman, H.Z and Matin, I, 2021, Poverty Dynamics and Household Realities, One Year into the COvid-19 Crisis, PPRC-BIGD 3<sup>rd</sup> Round Survey, April 2021, Dhaka: PPRC and BIGD

<sup>38</sup> Islam Sheikh & Divadkar Yash (2020) "How Bangladesh’s leaders should respond to economic threats of COVID-19", World Economic Forum, April 13

<sup>39</sup> Islam, R., Jahangir, A. R. (2020, April). Corona fallout spells disaster for millions of poor Bangladeshis: Economists. United News of Bangladesh. <https://unb.com.bd/category/special/corona-fallout-spells-disaster-for-millions-of-poor-bangladeshis-economists/48533>

<sup>40</sup> Riaz, A. (2020, April). Bangladesh’s COVID-19 stimulus: Leaving the most vulnerable behind. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/bangladeshs-covid-19-stimulus-leaving-the-most-vulnerable-behind/>

A CPD-BILS joint study inform that people belonging to the informal job sector, operating in the urban areas, suffered most due to unemployment caused. They study reported that 1.08 million people lost their livelihood in 2020-21 due to Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>41</sup> The report highlighted that the most affected workers' groups include urban-based day labourers mainly working in construction, informal services and transport workers (e.g. private car drivers, rickshaw pullers, launch and boat drivers). The impact had been widespread, of which urban based workers were heavily hit. The BILS-CPD study reports that about 69% of the employed population in urban areas were in high-risk states throughout 2020, which impacted 49% of the total economy. Pandemic driven high-risk sectors included manufacturing, construction, transport, wholesale and retail trade, food and accommodation services and personal services, and finance, domestic service, retail estate and education sectors were in medium-high risk and agriculture, health, information and communication belonged to low risk categories.

The coronavirus pandemic has substantially impacted MSMEs across all sectors of the economy employing around 18 million people. MSMEs faced distressed time due to limited sale and shortage of funds to maintain business operations and pay off salaries of the employees and workers, which is propping up the unemployment rate in the poor and lower-middle income families.<sup>42</sup> Employees in the MSMEs in all sectors not only faced threats of permanent layoff but also income loss enterprise closures during country-wide lockdown and subsequent economic slowdown. Failing to make the payments, more than 41% of female entrepreneurs shut down their businesses, while others scaled down their operations or relocated their set-ups, claimed by a report of the Center for Policy Dialogue.<sup>43</sup>

Females have been disproportionately affected due to their overall lower participation in the labor market and their occupations given the low rates of female labor force participation, women appear to be disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis and have experienced relatively higher job losses. Given their low participation in the labor force, women's employment experienced a larger reduction. The share of actual job losses among those stopping work was not very different by gender, but men were more likely to actively look for another job while women were more likely to exit the labor market. Women, who make up the Bangladesh's poor, are concentrated in the lowest paid, lowest power positions, and are in a particularly perilous situation. Already at the lowest paid, they often do not earn enough to have accumulated a financial safety net prior to the pandemic. The impact of the loss of income goes beyond the worker themselves: women disproportionately spend their income on their family and community. Moreover, women shoulder the majority of care responsibilities in the home—including child care, elderly care, and providing sick care—responsibilities which have increased due to the crisis, and shutdown of schools and health care provisions.

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41 Institute of Labour Studies and Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2021, 'Impact of Covid-19 on the Labour Market: Policy Proposals for Trade Union on Employment, Gender and Social Security for Sustainable Recovery', April 2021, Dhaka: BILS and CPD

42 Mahmud, M. A. F., Rafi, A. H., Noman, M. N., Shaekh, A. A., Rakibuzzaman, M. (2020, June). COVID-19 impact on Bangladesh economy. Lanka Bangla Asset Management. <https://www.arx.cfa/-/media/regional/arx/post-pdf/2020/06/22/covid-19-impact-onbangladesh-economy.ashx>

43 Centre for Policy Dialogue, "Socio-economic recovery measures of the government: How much women have benefitted" April 2021, Dhaka: CPD.

### 3. BANGLADESH'S RESPONSES TO COVID PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge to the social protection system of the country. To protect livelihoods and the economy during the lockdown and in subsequent period, both the government and other stakeholders responded with immediate support measures. While the government's supports to workers were in the form of stimulus packages, and the trade unions extended their supports by their own initiatives to several hundred thousand of COVID victims during pandemic in terms of food support, cash relief, and distribution of personal protective equipment like mask and hand sanitizer, and medicines. Unions were also involved enhancing awareness on the health helicine and social distancing. However, two major types responses, one from the government in terms of stimulus packages for supporting enterprises, and workers, and second from the tripartite stakeholders—state, employers, and workers—in the form of COVID-related convening among social dialogue partners are discussed below.

#### **Government Responses to Covid Pandemic**

The government has adopted a range of monetary and fiscal policies. Four stimulus-packages initially worth of BDT 1213.53 bn (approx. USD 14.3 bn) was provided in the first phase of the Covid pandemic. The Government of Bangladesh announced a package of COVID-19 economic response programmes in the last quarter of FY20 with an estimated value of US\$ 14.6 billion (4.5 percent of estimated FY20 GDP). The package includes support to workers in export-oriented sectors (in the form of subsidized loans to employers), working capital loans to businesses, insurance and incentives for doctors, and additional programs for the poor and small businesses. In specific terms the major programmes were:

1. BDT 300bn fund for banks to provide working capital loan facilities to the affected industries at an interest rate of 9%, half to be borne by borrower and half by Government as a subsidy.
2. BDT 200bn fund for banks to provide working capital loan facilities to Small (cottage industries) and medium enterprises at an interest rate of 9%, of which 4% to be borne by borrower and 5% by Government as a subsidy.
3. Enhancement Export Development Fund from USD 3.5bn to USD 5bn (with 2 % interest rate) for facilitating import of raw materials under Back-to-Back LC arrangement
4. BDT 50bn pre-shipment credit refinance scheme with 6 % interest rate.

The government has also implemented programs to protect jobs and employment, such as a temporary interest-free loan to pay wages and allowances for workers in enterprises that export at least of 80 per cent of their production. Bangladesh Bank has adopted measures to ease the economic burden—a moratorium on loan payments until 30 September 2020 and that such borrowers will not be in default was announced. Government allocated BDT 50bn (approx. USD595m) stimulus package for export-oriented industries towards salaries and funding of 2-year loans to factory owners at 2% interest.<sup>44</sup> The European Union and the German government

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<sup>44</sup> ILO Bangladesh, Ibid.



sanctioned a €113-million grant for around one million Bangladeshi garment workers who had either been laid off or permanently lost their jobs because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Bangladesh Bank has also implemented a BDT30 million refinance scheme for low-income groups, farmers, and marginal and small businesses through microcredit entities for income-driven activities.

Bangladesh has expanded the social assistance system to provide additional coverage to vulnerable groups. As a consequence, the coverage of cash transfers has increased from 15 million to 39.8 million people.<sup>45</sup> The government also declared a package of nearly \$2.5 billion allocation for small and medium sized industries to protect the livelihood of people employed in that sector.<sup>46</sup> To protect this large number of workers Bangladesh government has distributed food aid through Bangladesh's existing social safety programs such as the Vulnerable Group Feeding and Vulnerable Group Development for six months. Additionally, the government has provided food assistance through different channels, including the Special Open Market Sales program, which provides rice at BDT10/kg to vulnerable and jobless people (maximum of 20 kg per month) during the lockdown, and the Food Friendly Program (FFP), which was extended to give additional support during this period. The FFP consists of the sale of 30 kg of rice at the price of BDT10 per kg monthly to each family and is granted to 5 million families.

The government has approved two new COVID-19 stimulus packages of 27 billion taka to support small and medium enterprises and low-income communities. The size of the freshly approved first stimulus package is 15 billion taka and out of this amount, 3 billion takas will be given to the Small and Medium Enterprises Foundation for expanding its operations meant for the cottage and small organizations alongside facilitating the female entrepreneurs. The size of the fresh 2nd stimulus package is 12 billion taka and it will be spent for bringing the poor people, widows and husband-abandoned women of some 150 upazilas (subdistrict) under the government allowances in the next fiscal year. With the addition of these two new packages, the total number of COVID-19 stimulus packages in the country stood at 23 with an overall outlay of 1.24 trillion taka which is 4.4% of GDP.

In terms of implementation, of the 23 stimulus packages, 100 percent disbursement is indicated in only in two programmes—(1) salaries and allowances for workers in export subsidies (50 billion BDT); and (2) Open market sales at 10 BDT/Kg (7.7 billion BDT), for other programmes implementation rate is medium to low. The targeted programme for poor and vulnerable workers show medium to low disbursement. The package for cash transfer to targeted poor people (12.5 bln BDT) has been disbursed at 70%. The disbursement rate for working capital for CMSME (200 bln BDT) is 31.7%, health insurance and life insurance (7.5 billion BDT) is 3.4%. Over 7 percent disbursement rate is evidenced for programmes like Bangladesh Bank export

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<sup>45</sup> Fabianna Bacil and Gabriel Soyer, *COVID-19 and social protection in South Asia: Bangladesh*, International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth, September 2020, Retrieved from [https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/OP448\\_COVID\\_19\\_and\\_social\\_protection\\_in\\_South\\_Asia\\_Bangladesh.pdf](https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/OP448_COVID_19_and_social_protection_in_South_Asia_Bangladesh.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> World Economic Forum, *How Bangladesh's leaders should respond to the economic threats of COVID-19*, (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-coronavirus-bangladesh/>

development fund, and the ratio 57% for the package –Construction of home for homeless people (21.2 bln BDT).<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts made to improve coverage during the pandemic, the crisis has also highlighted the limitations of Bangladesh’s social protection system. In Bangladesh, the social protection system is still highly fragmented, with over 130 programs, which are often not linked, and with overlapping objectives, low budgets and inadequate coverage. Social insurance programs are currently very limited, hampering the construction of a comprehensive system that can effectively mitigate the population’s vulnerability and impacts of future shocks on people’s livelihoods.

### **COVID-related convening among social dialogue partners<sup>48</sup>**

Bangladesh’s national along with sectoral trade unions have had several bipartite meetings with the government. On 22 March 2020 at the onset of the COVID crisis around 70 trade union leaders in the meeting chaired by the State Minister of Labor and Employment, demanded that the government ensure health and safety at workplace, free treatment of corona infected workers, full wage payment and festival (eid) bonus, and zero termination during crisis period.<sup>49</sup> The IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC) appealed to the government to protect workers from the impact of Covid-19.<sup>50</sup> Their demands included— (a) no workers can be laid off, or terminated or retrenched during corona crisis; (b) treatment have to be ensured free of cost to corona virus infected workers; (c) all workers must be paid in full wages without any deduction; (d) festival (Eid) bonus should be paid by 15 May; (e) consult unions and set up a tripartite committee to monitor the situation and recommend steps needed; (f) ensure that factory owners provide hand sanitizers, soap, and PPEs for workers; and (g) to avoid the humanitarian crisis, the government, brands and employers should take shared responsibility to ensure workers’ wages and benefits, jobs security and social protection.

Similar demands were placed with RMG employers and their associations. In few cases, commitments of the employers towards ensuring health and safety measures at factory levels and timely wage payment and bonus of workers were made. Shadhin Bangla Garment Sramik Karmachari Federation (SBGSKF) reported that it along with several other unions negotiated in around 20 factories in Gazipur on the retrenchments of workers, and had been successful in stopping workers’ termination.<sup>51</sup> The meeting of IndustriAll Bangladesh Council (IBC) with the BGMEA on 07 May 2020 led to signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) on not to

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<sup>47</sup> World Bank, Bangladesh Development Update: Moving Forward: Connectivity and Logistics to Strengthen Competitiveness April 2021, Dhaka: World Bank

<sup>48</sup> This section heavily draws on Jakir Hossain and Afroza Akter, 2020, Mapping Social Dialogue in Apparel: Bangladesh, Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> The Financial Express, 23 March 2020. “Govt sticks to its decision to keep factories open”. Retrieved on 10 September, 2020: <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/first-page/govt-sticks-to-its-decision-to-keep-factories-open-1584896463>

<sup>50</sup> IndustriALL, *Bangladeshi government must protect workers from impact of Covid-19*, (May 2020). Retrieved on 8 September 2020: <http://www.industriall-union.org/bangladesh-government-must-protect-workers-from-impacts-of-covid-19>

<sup>51</sup> Maheen Sultan, *COVID-19 Crisis Implications for the RMG Sector: Trade Union Responses*, (Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, BRAC University, April 2020), 8. Retrieved on 10 September 2020: [https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final\\_Report-COVID-19-Crisis-Implications-for-the-RMG-Sector-Trade-Union-Responses.pdf](https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final_Report-COVID-19-Crisis-Implications-for-the-RMG-Sector-Trade-Union-Responses.pdf)

lay-off factories and retrench workers, on the due payment of salaries, and formed of a joint monitoring committee addressing the agreement.<sup>52</sup> The IBC, in line with the employers' urges, also called on the brands and buyers not to cancel their work orders.

The tripartite meetings have also been held to address the COVID related crisis at workplaces particularly in the apparel sector. The first tripartite meeting held in March 2020, decided that garment production units to be kept open with adequate safety measures as per government's health safety guidelines.<sup>53</sup> The decision was not enforced properly in many of the factories. Trade union leaders reported that most of the owners were indifferent to enforce health and safety measures at their factories; neither the rules for using facemasks and hand gloves, as well as social distancing were followed in most of the factories nor adequate number of hand sanitizers and hand wash facilities were made available.<sup>54</sup>

The payment of wages and benefits was core of the discussions in three consecutive tripartite meetings (22 April, 25 April and 4 May 2020). Initially it was decided that workers of the factories that remained closed during corona period public holidays would receive 60% of wages for the month of April,<sup>55</sup> but then in subsequent meeting decided that the payment would be 65% of regular wages.<sup>56</sup> The decision led the government to declare that the workers of garment factories that were closed during public holidays would receive 65 % of workers' gross monthly wages for the month of April, and the workers who worked during the public holidays would receive full payment for the days they worked in. In another tripartite meeting (16 May, 2020), it was decided that 100 percent bonus would be paid to workers, albeit in two phases— 50 percent of basic salary as festival (EID) bonus before the festival and another 50 percent after. The government too declared a stimulus packages worth of TK. 10,500 for export-oriented industries including garments to pay wages for the month of April, May, and June.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the government support, workers of many factories did not get wages and bonus on due time. Sammilitio Garments Sramik Federation (SGSF) called for legal action against the RMG factories that failed to provide workers' wages of April and EID bonus. Nazma Akter, the president of SGSF stated that 261 garment and textile factories did not pay wages of workers for April, while over 500 factories (11% of RMG factories) failed to pay festival allowances before

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<sup>52</sup> ILO, COVID-19 and the world of work- Country policy responses Bangladesh, (2020). Retrieved from ILO: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/regional-country/country-responses/lang--en/index.htm#BD>

<sup>53</sup> Star Business report, "Garment factories to stay open", *The Daily Star*, 23 March 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/garment-factories-stay-open-1884538>

<sup>54</sup> Iffat Jahan Antara., August 2020, Ibid. Covering the media reports on the corona crisis in RMG sector during the period 16 April – 9 May 2020, this study identified the roles of different actors including trade unions and workers' rights activists as they navigate the crisis by dealing with international buyers, RMG owners, and the Government.

<sup>55</sup> Monira Munni, "RMG workers to get 60pc of April wages", *The Financial Express*, 30 April 2020. Retrieved from: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/trade/rmg-workers-to-get-60pc-of-april-wages-1588217153>

<sup>56</sup> Staff Correspondent, "RMG trade bodies ask owners not to pay more than 60pc of April wages", *NewAge*, 4 May 2020. Retrieved from NewAge: <https://www.newagebd.net/article/105693/rmg-trade-bodies-ask-owners-not-to-pay-more-than-60pc-of-april-wages>

<sup>57</sup> Star Online Report, "Impact of coronavirus: PM announces Tk 5,000cr stimulus package for export-oriented industries", *The Daily Star*, 25 March 2020. Retrieved from Daily Star: <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-deadly-new-threat/news/pm-announces-tk-5000cr-stimulus-package-export-oriented-industries-1885813>

EID.<sup>58</sup> Other labor leaders also put the number of factories that have not paid the wage of April or festival bonus in the same range. The Business Standard (TBS) notes that 539 (12% factories) did not pay April salaries or festival bonuses.<sup>59</sup> The non-payment of wage for subsequent months had too been reported. The daily Prothom Alo reported that about 1175 (25% of factories) factories did not pay wages of the month of June up to 21 July.<sup>60</sup> A report of Clean Clothes Campaign estimated that the RMG workers of Bangladesh received 29.5 percent less wages in March to May than the regular times. According to the report, the Bangladesh's readymade garment workers lost wages worth around \$501 million (about Tk 4,250 crore) for three months, March to May, due to the corona pandemic.

It was decided in tripartite consultations (held on April 28-29, 2020) that owners of garments factory would not declare lay off of any factory and terminate any workers during the corona period and the decision was circulated by DIFE.<sup>61</sup> The decision on factory closure, factory lay off and terminations of workers were the hardly implemented issues.<sup>62</sup> Despite the government declaration, there is evidence that the decisions those were taken in the different tripartite meetings were not implemented properly.

Data from industrial police show that 29,369 workers had lost their job in May to June and most of them were from RMG factories.<sup>63</sup> DIFE in its crisis report covering till 17 September 2020, reports that 26 factories have been laid off in which 23523 workers were engaged, and 23560 workers of 75 RMG factories terminated (Table-1). The trade union leaders however alleged that the number of laid off and terminated workers is much higher than the official data, may have crossed hundred thousand workers.<sup>64</sup> BGMEA announced that, the workers who would not go back to the work within the deadline<sup>65</sup> would lose job. As estimated by BGMEA there is around 4.1 million workers in garment industries. Following the deadline of BGMEA given for joining the job, according to DIFE only 15 lakh workers joined before June 1, 2020. It indicates that the rest 26 lakh RMG workers have had lost their jobs for not joining within the deadline even after government decision of no termination would be allowed during the Covid crisis.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> TBS Report, "RMG laborer leaders demand action against defaulter factories", The Business Standard, 28 May 2020. Retrieved from TBS: <https://tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/rmg-leaders-demand-action-against-defaulter-factories-86236>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Desk report, "Following wages RMG workers will get less bonus too (In Bengali)", Prothom Alo, 21 July 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.prothomalo.com/business/মজুরির-পর-বোনাসও-কম-পাবেন-পোশাকশ্রমিকেরা>

<sup>61</sup> (Mirdha, The Daily Star, 8 June 2020)

<sup>62</sup> (DIFE, September 2020, Apparel Sources, 1 October 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Opinion Report, "Continued layoffs, despite govt warning, unacceptable", NewAge, 14 July 2020. Retrieved from NewAge: <https://www.newagebd.net/article/111076/continued-layoffs-despite-govt-warning-unacceptable>

<sup>64</sup> Antara, August 2020), Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Most of the country's apparel industries have announced re-opening of their units from May 17 before the government's announcement of further extension of general holidays till May 30. According to RMG insiders, most factories compelled their workers to start work from May 26, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Mohosinul Karim, "Over 26 lakh RMG workers lost jobs, BGMEA claims 55,549", *The Daily Observer*, 11 June 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=259900>

The outcome of the both bipartite and tripartite meetings does reveal that the statutory social dialogue mechanism did not work properly during the COVID crisis. Nor the statutory bipartite forums— Participation Committee (WPC) (outside EPZ), and the Workers’ Welfare Committee (WWC) (inside EPZs), neither the regular tripartite institution— Tripartite Consultative Council (TCC) had any convening/negotiations among social dialogue partners. Despite having formal tripartite forum for RMG – Tripartite Consultative Council for RMG that works for developing harmonious industrial relation in RMG sector, another ad-hoc based tripartite forum— “Tripartite Crisis Management Committee (CMC) has been formed.

The ad-hoc committee was entrusted to: (a) monitor the timely payment of wages/salaries, arrears, bonuses and other applicable benefits; (b) address the issues of unfair labor practices including anti-union discrimination and unlawful dismissals; (c) conduct joint tripartite inspection/investigation of factories in the event of labor unrest; (d) settle labor unrest through tripartite consultation; and (e) ensure compliance with COVID-19 related hygiene and safety at the workplace (in line with the MOLE’s OSH guidelines) including transport to and from workplace.<sup>67</sup> From March to July 2020, the committee held several meetings and took decisions to protect RMG workers from Covid impact, however, labour leaders allege that the opinion of workers representatives had been neglected in many cases.

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<sup>67</sup> (ILO, *Ibid*).

## 4. BANGLADESH'S DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES AND THE URGENCY IN THE WORLD OF WORK

### **Bangladesh Development Priorities amid Covid Pandemic**

The COVID-19 reinforces the importance of speeding up many of the reforms including revenue performance, private investment climate, export diversification and domestic job creation. Similarly, export diversification and expansion of a diversified manufacturing base are of utmost importance. The government recognizes that this will not be possible without substantial increases in domestic and foreign private investment. Thus, the 8FYP has focus utmost attention to improving the investment climate for domestic and foreign private investment. The short-term unemployment resulting from COVID-19 including retrenchment of overseas workers present an immense challenge, job creation accordingly has been set as a top priority of the country's development plan.

The main task of the 8FYP is to start the implementation of PP2041 in a way that it brings Bangladesh closer to the goals of attaining UMIC status, attaining major SDG targets, and eliminating extreme poverty by FY2031. In the backdrop of these factors, the 8th Plan centres on six core themes:

- Rapid recovery for COVID-19 to restore human health, confidence, employment, income and economic activities;
- GDP growth acceleration, employment generation, productivity acceleration and rapid poverty reduction;
- A broad-based strategy of inclusiveness with a view to empowering every citizen to participate fully and benefit from the development process and helping the poor and vulnerable with social protection- based income transfers;
- A sustainable development pathway that is resilient to disaster and climate change; entails sustainable use of natural resources; and successfully manages the inevitable urbanization transition;
- Development and improvement of critical institutions necessary to lead the economy to UMIC status;
- Attaining SDG targets and coping up the impact of LDC graduation

Even though the 8FYP set goal to restore human health, confidence, employment, income and economic activities during Covid, it barely addresses the existing and Covid-19 induced labour market challenges in Bangladesh. Thus, there is a requirement to acknowledging that the labour market challenges is a precondition to taking any counter-measures, and there is a need to undertake a comprehensive approach linking policies and programmes for economic and social recoveries.

### **World of Work Intervention Areas in line with Bangladesh Development Priorities**

Bangladesh economy over the last three decades has witnessed a shift from exporting primary goods and raw materials to also exporting manufactured goods and intermediate inputs. From modest beginnings in the late 1970s, the garment has overtaken traditional export items like

jute and tea as the major export product by the mid-1980s and, by the early 1990s had become the champion manufacturing export industry. The growing importance of the sector in the Bangladesh economy is quite obvious from the fact that the share of nontraditional, process-based manufacturing exports like garments have posted a rise compared to traditional resource-based exports. Indeed, the growth of the sector was enough to push up the aggregate, and also it has compensated for the shortfall in the export earnings of some of the traditional key sectors such as jute, tea, and leather.

The expansion of the garment sector has had a number of positive externalities such as increased economic activities in areas related to banking and insurance, hotel and tourism, real estate, recycling, consumer goods, utility services, and transportation. Importantly, the export growth has led to declining significance of foreign aid in the country—a transformation of the economy from aid dependency to trade. The transformation is further evident in terms of employment generation. The production process of garment industry is highly labor-intensive. While in 1985, just 0.1 million people were employed in the sector, within two decades it grew to around two million workers, and currently the sector employs over 4 million workers.

True, the structural changes in the economy in line with competitive advantage has brought about fundamental changes in labour market, not only in terms of its implications on labour in view of the decline in some economic sectors and growth in others, but also in terms of flexibilization of employment to confront increasingly competitive markets. The increased competition has weakened the bargaining position of the state in the global market, as well as made weaker the basis on which employees could make claims on their employers. The weakening of the regulatory capacity of government in the face of heightened international competition is another source through which pressures to lower wages and other labour standards operate.

### **Structural Changes in Labour Markets**

The structural transformation of the economy in line with competitive advantage in garment products has caused changes in the labour market. First of which is as regards participation of labour; there is a mismatch between sectoral growth and labour absorption. These changes are due mainly to changed export structure and intra-sectoral changes in export composition as well as to flexibilization and informalization of work.

The key features of the growth performance of the country when decomposed into sectoral growth show that GDP growth was largely propelled by the industrial sector. The growth in the agricultural sector showed decreasing trend during 1980-81 to 1994-95, but the sector grew almost at an average rate of 5 percent during 1995-96 to 1999-2000; it fell to 2.5 percent average growth during 2000-01 to 2004-05 period but over the 2005-06 to 2007-08 period, now in 2016-17 the agricultural growth rate has been 2.79 percent. It grew at average rate of 4.4 percent. Since the early nineties, growth in the service sector has been showing an increasing trend, and over the last three years period it grew by 6.7 percent on average.<sup>68</sup>

However, agriculture remains the largest provider of employment. Agriculture contributes highest (43.5 percent) in generating employment amongst a labour force (above 15 years) of

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<sup>68</sup>Ministry of Finance, Government of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Economic Review, various years.

51.0 million (male 38.5 million and female 12.5 million) within 53.7 million economically active-population.<sup>69</sup>

The share was around 10 percent in all the period covered by the four subsequent labour force surveys (LFS) from 1995/96 to 2005/06. Population above 15 years of age has been counted as labour force in the MES, and LFS 2002-03 and 2005-06, but in the previous LFSs (1995-96 and 1999-00), the criterion for counting labour force was population above 10 years.

With trade openness policies in a labour surplus country like Bangladesh, the employment dynamics depend upon how far employment is gained or lost in shifting investment from non-tradable to tradable sectors. The structural changes in the economy require not only sustained labour demand, but also shifts in labour demand away from low-wage, low productivity sectors like agriculture. However, the employment effects of shifts in investment from non-tradable to tradable goods are not so evident. While garment sector shows perceptible employment gains, several industries have suffered a decline. Contrary to contribution of each sector to GDP, the pattern of absorption of employment shows the opposite. The sector's growth has outstripped overall economic growth but has failed to absorb labour in the sector similar to its contribution in the economy, as well as in proportion to the growth of working age population.

### *The Weakening Bargaining Power and Regulatory Capacities*

With increased competition and country's continued bid to interact within the globalizing market on a position of strength has influenced the bargaining position of state and non-state actors. The weakening of the bargaining position has come through in particular due to market concentration of the garment exports and differential treatment of Bangladesh's products in global trade. Bangladesh's garment exports have undergone concentration in terms of its markets as export destinations as well as in terms of products exported. The US and the EU are the most important export destinations of Bangladeshi products—two export destinations cover over 90 percent of garment export. The sector operates in the low-end product markets; and over the years, exports have concentrated on a limited number of products. There is also very high similarity between exports items of Bangladesh and China in the US market. Nine out of ten Bangladesh's top garment export items matches with China's top ten items.<sup>70</sup> Such high concentration of both markets and products make the country vulnerable to changes in the specific markets of export destination. It was widely feared that Bangladesh export markets would invariably loose out due to falling demand in the export market during the recession.

The apprehension of export loss did not materialize, as evident from the continued growth of the sector, possibly due to shift of demand from high-end garment segments to low-end segments in which Bangladesh operate. The disproportionate implication on worker is, however, that the apprehension of market loss has been widely used by the Bangladesh's garment manufacturers and exporters to argue "poor job is better than no job." The competitive logic widely justified below the poverty-level wages and substandard employment as representing an improvement over the next-best option of having no job.

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69 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Monitoring of Employment Survey (MES) 2009: Government of Bangladesh. 2009

70 Mlachila, M. & Yang, Y. *The End of Textile Quotas: a Case Study of the Impact on Bangladesh*. IMF Working Paper. WP/04/108. Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund. 2004



In the face of heightened international competition, the spheres of influence on the capacity of government to impose regulatory mandates in Bangladesh are numerous. One is the country's continued policy stance in encouraging foreign direct investment (FDI), and the other is the threat of relocation abroad by locally placed foreign enterprises. The weakening of the regulatory capacity is evident through the establishment of differential labour law regime.

The active policy stance of Bangladesh towards greater foreign investment has led to installation of differential about standards regime in the country. While the most industrial workers including garment are currently under the purview of the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2006, the coverage has not been extended to the workers in Export Processing Zones (EPZs). The differential labour regime was set up in the hope of attracting investment, creating employment, generating foreign exchange, and promoting transfer of technologies and skills (backward linkages) to industries outside the zones. Country's continued policy stance in encouraging foreign direct investment provided the impetus to focus on competitiveness, and accordingly differential labour law regimes were created.

### **Covid Concerns and the Required Changes in the World of Work**

To address the challenges originating from the continued structural changes, weakening of regulatory capacity of the state and bargaining power of non-state actors, it is imperative to intervene in the world of work. This becomes more important as the near-term prognosis of the Covid pandemic is worrisome. Many who lost jobs and livelihoods will not be able to re-enter labour markets any time soon, especially for women, who are disproportionately amongst the first out and would be the last to return; and for informal sector and MSME workers, and Migrant workers, already facing exclusion in employment, are also more likely to experience greater difficulties returning to work during recovery. The long-term impacts are also of concern. These include severe impact on efforts to reduce poverty and inequality, putting SDG achievement further at risk. COVID-19 led digitization and the move to remote work, greater flexibility, the downsides of imminent effects of new technologies do risk deepening gaps and inequalities. This leads to bring changes in the world of work in line with the country's development priorities.

Development Priorities	Required changes in the world of Work
1. Rapid recovery from COVID-19;	<b>Stimulating economy and employment:</b> immediate and long term support for at risk sectors/ workers
2. GDP growth acceleration, employment generation and rapid poverty reduction;	<b>Supporting enterprises, jobs, and income:</b> Job creation, Retention of jobs, support to job creating sectors, employment and income protection
3. Broad-based strategy of inclusiveness;	<b>Protecting work and workers:</b> Tackling structural changes in labour market, and inequality and vulnerability; universal coverage of rights, Balancing economic and social upgrading, skills promotion, resilient and resource rich workforce
4. Sustainable development pathway that is resilient to disaster and climate change;	
5. Improvement of institutions to lead the economy to UMIC status by 2031;	<b>Relying on social dialogue :</b> Upgrading and enhancing Institutional capacities, Improving regulatory capacity of state and non-state actors, Promotion and protection of decent work, enhancing bargaining power of state and non-state actors,
6. Attaining SDGs targets and mitigating the impact of LDC graduation	

### *Stimulating economy and employment*

The critical problem in Bangladesh is that employment creation has not kept pace with economic growth. In recent years, performance in economic growth has not been matched by performance in job creation, and in the current context of ongoing recession in many parts of the world the challenge of employment creation is even greater. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of the jobs deficit is its impact on young people; without decent jobs we are in grave danger of letting down the future generation.

While open unemployment is a problem, the more serious problem in the country is that of underemployment, which manifests itself in different forms including workers involuntarily working less than full-time or taking jobs below their qualifications or skills. Growing numbers of workers not able to gain access to formal employment are ending up in the informal economy where work is done beyond the reach of formal laws and enforcement mechanisms and which is of low productivity, insecure, poorly remunerated and lacking social protection. The search for jobs has also resulted in millions of workers, a growing proportion of who are women, being on the move – from rural to urban areas and across national borders.

When people cannot find work at home in their communities and societies, they look elsewhere. Labour migration easily becomes a source of economic, social and political tensions, not to mention human trafficking. Even when people have jobs today, their level of insecurity and uncertainty has increased; they worry about being employed and able to feed their families.

### *Supporting enterprises, jobs, and income*

Low rate of wage is the most significant issue in this regard. The amount of wage, the workers are getting are hardly sufficient to maintain a minimum standard of livelihood considering the rate of inflation and other socio- economic context of the country. The sector-wise minimum wages while cover some 41 sectors now, however, not only have the minimum wages in most of the factories remained unchanged for many years, the manufacturers who claim a wide array of benefits and priority from governments, have shown an unacceptable unwillingness to pass on a share of these benefits and to recognize and implement workers' rights.

Along with poor wage, there are also instances of irregularity in timeliness of wage payments that makes the life of the workers and their family members more vulnerable economically. Long working hour is another important issue in this regard. The workplaces are also not free from discrimination, nor provide safe working conditions in terms of occupation safety and health, and work environment. Physical conditions of the workplace are also considered to be poor. Workers often are to work under conditions that are completely uncongenial. Workplaces often lack safety measures against occupational risks and accidents. Consequently, accidents causing injuries to workers are common at workplaces. Along with poor physical and safety condition, workers often face physical and psychological harassments at their workplaces. Deaths and injuries take a particularly heavy toll where large numbers of people are engaged in hazardous activities. Disability as a result of hazardous work is a major cause of poverty, affecting entire families. The poorest and least protected, often women, children and migrants, are among the most affected.

More often than not, prevention of occupational injuries, death and diseases is missing from the agenda where they work. The conditions under which most informal workers operate are precarious, unhealthy and unsafe. Many of the micro enterprises in which they work have ramshackle structures and lack sanitary facilities or portable water. For many workers, and particularly for women, their home is their workplace and they frequently live and work in unsafe and unhealthy conditions – not only for themselves but also for their family members. Wages, working time, work organization and conditions of work, arrangements to balance working life and the demands of family and life outside work, non-discrimination and protection from harassment and violence at work are core elements of the employment relationship and of workers' protection, and also affect economic performance.

### *Protecting work and workers*

Decent work deficits are typically severe in rural areas. Rural labour markets are often dysfunctional. Labour market institutions, organization and representation of rural workers tend to be weak. Underemployment is widespread and incomes are generally low. Access to social protection is extremely limited. Rural workers are not fully covered by national labour law and their rights are not realized or enforced.

A large share of economic activity in rural areas tends to be informal. The larger part of the Bangladesh's working population continues to earn its livelihood in the informal economy; women, youth, older people, minorities, migrant workers, indigenous peoples are disproportionately represented. The greater part of new jobs created is informal. Informality does not necessarily recede as countries grow; Bangladesh are experiencing growing informalization in spite of good economic performance. The informal economy includes waged workers and own-account workers, contributing family workers and those moving from one such situation to another. It also includes some of those who are engaged in new flexible work arrangements and they are at the periphery of the core enterprise or at the lowest end of the production chain. The formal work environment has undergone a process of rapid transformation, leaving the majority of the workforce in the informal sector. Informal forms of employment include, for example, agricultural day laborers, urban street vendors, paid domestic workers, or at-home producers of clothing or other manufactured goods. A high proportion of informal workers are self-employed.

Work in the informal economy is characterized by low or irregular incomes, long working hours, small or undefined workplaces, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and lack of access to information, markets, finance, training and technology. Workers in the informal economy are not recognized, registered, regulated or protected under labour legislation and social protection. Informal workers and their economic units are generally marked by poverty, leading to powerlessness, exclusion and vulnerability; they do not enjoy secure property rights and have difficulty accessing the legal and judicial system for enforcing their rights.

Migrant workers constitute a growing share of the workforce. Women are independently migrating for work in considerably larger numbers than in the past. The unskilled often have difficulty obtaining visas and work permits. Demographic trends and uneven patterns of development within and between countries suggest that labour migration will not only continue but will grow, posing immense challenges as well as opportunities for the country For

migrant workers themselves, many, especially low skilled workers, experience serious abuse and exploitation. In the face of rising barriers to cross border labour mobility, the growth of irregular migration, and trafficking and smuggling of human beings constitute major challenges to the protection of human and labour rights. Trafficking in persons including the trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of men, women and children for labour exploitation, too remains a grave concern in the country.

Disparities exist in working conditions and treatment in countries of destination at two levels: (a) between migrant workers themselves and (b) between migrant workers and national workers. There is a high level of segmentation in the labour market and large wage disparities between national and foreign workers in countries that Bangladesh sends labour, particularly in the Middle East. The migrant workers in most cases do not enjoy any social security benefits.

The recruitment processes have brought enormous miseries. Some recruitment agencies send workers for non-existent jobs, some provide false information about jobs, and many charge migrants excessive fees for services. There are also sizeable intermediaries engaged in smuggling and trafficking of migrants. The indulging agencies have hardly been brought to book. There is also a growing trend of subcontracting of temporary and seasonal workers at the expense of workers' benefits and entitlements such as holidays, bargaining rights and social protection. These fraudulent recruitment and placement processes have left far reaching consequences on conditions and treatments of migrant workers. The deceitful and sham practices of money making have in cases forced to endure situations of virtual debt-bondage or near-slavery to pay off debts owed to recruiters and traffickers.

### *Relying on social dialogue*

In Bangladesh the concept of workers' participation and representation in industrial governance structures has been accepted as workers' fundamental right and has got statutory recognition. In the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, and the EPZ Workers Association and Industrial Relations Act 2010 some arrangements have been made to establish a number of institutional mechanisms to ensure workers' participation and representation at plant level, sector/industry level and national level. Due to weak enforcement of the labour law the provisions of regulatory frameworks related to participation and representation mechanisms are not being exercised properly. In practice, those institutions fail to ensure effective participation and representation of the workers in terms of their interest articulation, leadership creation, and inclusive decision-making.

Due to this lack of effective participation rights, the workers are being deprived of some other fundamental rights like freedom of association, and collective bargaining. These deprivations compel the workers to go through a violent and informal route to channel their grievances and express their demands and aspiration. In the last couple of years the informal and coercive form of interest articulation has made the industrial and labour relations confrontational.

Due to the lack of democratic practice through workers' participation and representation in institutional mechanisms, balance between efficiency and voice is not being achieved. Interests, aspirations, and inclinations of the workers' are not being channeled in formal ways. Workers' leadership is not growing as per expectation. Inclusive decisions are not being made in the real

sense of the term and consequently the outcomes of the workers' resistance through good faith collective bargaining and equal footing negotiation are being a zero-sum game.

Labour sector in Bangladesh is a key policy area as it plays important role in the country's political and economic directions. But this promising sector is increasingly being challenged both from inside and outside. Bangladesh's industrial relations is characterized by non-compliance of rights issues, poor enforcement of labour laws, weak mechanisms of industrial and labour relations, and lack participation and representation. These unfair labour governance processes create and increase only discontent among workers and that cause labour unrest which in turn leads to lower productivity in industry and lower economic growth.

A range of factors including the representative institutional mechanisms and the efficacy of the system in general establish labour law application and promote and protect workers' rights. The labour administration for promoting compliance with labour laws and for resolving labour disputes is weak. Not only broad-based participatory mechanism and effective representation of workers are lacking, the administrative mechanisms often fail to provide the workers with amicable solution of grievances and disputes due to either non-prioritization of the imperative to make labour administration functional for workers, or deliberately putting workers at the vulnerable end.

## 5. TRADE UNIONS' STRATEGIC ACTION PRIORITIES

Stimulating the creation of productive employment and tackling long-term systemic labour market problems—of policies and institutions—will require innovative policy solutions drawing on the analysis of systematic biases labour market in the country provides against workers especially at times of crisis. To ensure the type of development trajectories that reduces poverty as well as enhance equality, a large-scale and proactive policy actions should be pursued. It is essential to promote policies that enable the creation of productive and decent jobs accessible particularly to those most disadvantaged.

Based on the required changes in the world of work amid Covid pandemic in Bangladesh, trade union strategic priorities are presented in four pronged strategies—(a) Stimulating economy and employment—immediate and long term support for at risk sectors/ workers; (b) Supporting enterprises, jobs, and income—job creation, Retention of jobs, support to job creating sectors, employment and income protection; (c) Protecting work and workers—tackling structural changes in labour market, and inequality and vulnerability; universal coverage of rights, balancing economic and social upgrading, skills promotion, resilient and resource rich workforce; and (d) Relying on social dialogue—upgrading and enhancing Institutional capacities, Improving regulatory capacity of state and non-state actors, promotion and protection of decent work, enhancing bargaining power of state and non-state actors.

### STIMULATING ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT

#### Immediate stimulus packages needed mitigating the impact on labour markets

##### *Provision of financial relief for enterprises (particularly MSME and Informal sector workers)*

Protection of employment for millions of workers has been the primary concern/challenges in the pandemic situation. The informal sector absorbs about 86 per cent of the total employment. Despite several packages taken by the government, the sector has not received adequate care. The problems are of two-folds: firstly, many sectors remained out of the attention, and secondly, the non-distribution of funds for the MSMEs. Construction, transport, automobile workshops, hotel-restaurants and beauty parlour are examples where jobs have been vulnerable, but they did not receive the necessary support. Any failure in revitalizing these sectors means insecure jobs for millions of workers. Appropriate financial stimulus is needed in this regard. More importantly, allocation-only would not bring the desired outcomes. The government allocated Tk.20,000 crore as the working capital support to the cottage, micro, small and medium enterprise sector. However, the progress of disbursement was grim. At the end of August 2020, the disbursement was just 20 per cent that indicated slow progress

compared to the support for export-oriented industries<sup>71</sup>. Therefore, both adequate allocation and appropriate policy for timely disbursement of the funds have to be prioritized.

#### ***Preparation of database and continue income support for workers at risk and vulnerability***

Trade unions should immediately bring to the surface the issue of preparing a central database of the workers. The need for this database has been felt more strongly during the pandemic. Some of the available services could not reach the target group because of failure to identify the beneficiaries. The database is also needed to avoid misuse of funds, the duplicity of services and address the alleged corruption in the distribution process. The BDT 2500 cash support of the government is an important example here. Although the government initially planned to distribute the cash support to 50 lac families, it could reach 35 lac families,<sup>72</sup> around 30% short of its target. It failed to reach the target, but there was also misappropriation in the distribution process. The lack of database and difficulty reaching the poor, possibly led to the reduced target households (35 lac families) for the second round incentives, planned to be provided in May 2020. On the other hand, due to the absence of a database, it has not been possible to distribute wage support among the retrenched workers from a fund created by the EU and Germany. Therefore, trade unions must demand and advocate with the government to develop a central database of the workers. The database would be instrumental in distributing support/services timely and efficiently to the vulnerable and at-risk workers and minimising the chance of irregularities.

#### ***Sectoral variations and priorities to facilitate sector-specific responses to labour intensive and higher value addition sectors.***

While designing and allocating stimulus packages and incentives, it is essential to prioritise the sectors based on the labour intensity and the scale of value addition. It is true that although the whole economy has suffered, the magnitude of vulnerability and threats/risks differ from sector to sector. Therefore, sectoral variations must be taken into account for the stimulus packages. At the same time, it is also needed to select priorities for higher value addition sectors like jute, knit RMG, tannery, ship-building, and pharmaceuticals.

#### ***The distribution of stimulus package benefits be linked with tripartite mechanisms.***

It is a dire need that determination, selection and distribution of stimulus packages should follow the principles of tripartism. It has been observed that the opinion and participation of the workers were largely absent in this regard. Even workers'/TUs' participation in selecting the beneficiaries/workers was absent for distributing the EU and German-funded support to the retrenched workers. The labour movement must demand that the tripartite mechanism be followed to ensure transparency and accountability in the distribution of all the stimulus and ensure that these stimuli work for the workers.

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<sup>71</sup> Rejaul Karim Byron and Wasim Bin Habib, Covid-19 Stimulus Package: Disparity in disbursement, The Daily Star, September 29, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/covid-19-stimulus-package-disparity-disbursement-1969109>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

### **Fiscal and monetary policies to support employment and social protection**

Fiscal and monetary policies must be adopted in a way that facilitates both employment and social protection. In this regard, trade unions need to influence policymakers to achieve the following:

#### *Continue support for enterprises (especially MSMEs and informal economy), and expand labour market interventions to get people back into work, and sustain social protection measures and social spending.*

The lockdown imposed to check the spread of the Covid-19 impacted enterprises, especially the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), harshly. An estimate shows that the local MSMEs faced a loss estimated at Tk92,000 crores.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the sector requires continuous support from the government for its revitalization and to get back the capacity to host employment to the people. The supports required in this regard include higher spending and tax exemptions, public sector loan facilities with easy terms and condition, loan guarantees, allowing the rational longer-period loan repayment grace period. Moreover, along with supporting the enterprises, the government should be continuing and enhancing spending on social protection measures.

#### *Investing in public employment programmes as effective part of the crisis response.*

Job loss and income loss, unemployment and underemployment have been the inseparable scenario of the covid-19 pandemic. According to a Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) survey conducted from May 5 to May 29, 2020, around 13% of pre-covid employed persons lost their jobs.<sup>74</sup> It was an immediate consequence of the pandemic in the early months of the outbreak. The instances of job loss increased in the following months. A World Bank report showed that around 68 per cent of the people who had to stop working in urban areas of Dhaka and Chattogram due to the pandemic had lost their jobs<sup>75</sup>. In such a situation, to protect employment and job, public employment programmes need to be widened and strengthened for which adequate investment is required. Unions need to raise demand and create pressure and advocate for investing an appropriate amount in this regard as part of their strategic action.

#### *Keeping the inflation low of cost of product and services consumed by working-class and introduction of targeted rationing system*

Monetary policies should be set in such a way that they would keep the price of the daily necessities as low as possible. The pandemic has hit hard the working-class population. Either the employment opportunity of the workers has shrunk, or the level of income has significantly decreased. In such a context, controlling the price of daily essentials, especially for those which the workers consume more than the other social groups (e.g., coarse rice, house-building materials, low-end energy consumption), must be given a priority. At the same time, a targeted rationing system is needed for the most vulnerable sections of the society.

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<sup>73</sup> Fahim Reza Shovon, Covid-19: Employment takes a serious hit in Bangladesh, Dhaka Tribune, 23 September 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/health/coronavirus/2020/09/23/employment-during-an-economy-ravaged-by-covid-19>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> World Bank, Losing Livelihoods: The labour market impacts of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, September 2020, Dhaka: World Bank <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/68pc-lost-jobs-dhaka-and-ctg-1968641>



***De-incentivize job replacing technology adoption through higher tax provisions, and encourage labour intensive job creation through fiscal and monetary means.***

Technological advancement is indeed needed to develop the capacity of the economy to compete in the global market. However, it is also true that the pandemic has changed the overall condition of the economy and its employment scenario. In such a condition, we need to rethink our priority. We need to decide what to protect first. In job creation and preservation efforts, a policy shift could play some instrumental role. It is needed to prioritise labour-intensive in contrast over technology-intensive job creation. Therefore, policies should focus on labour-intensive jobs as we need to accommodate a vast labour force in the labour market. Fiscal and monetary policies should reflect on these priorities by reducing/withdrawing incentive and imposing higher taxes for importing technologies that replace the workers' job. In contrast, labour intensive job creation should be incentivized.

***Trade and investment policies should contain labour clause promoting productive and decent work.***

The country is linked with global production network/chains and international trade. Both bilateral and multilateral agreements in force that promote trade. Besides, as domestic policy options, the government is attracting foreign direct investments to promote economic growth and create employment. Both trade and investment have consequences on the wage, occupational safety and health, and others issues of decent work. However, it is a reality that, in most cases, trade and investment policies and agreements do not address the concerns for the labour. Strong advocacy and lobby are needed with the government to include labour clauses (including labour standards as promoted in the Bangladesh labour Act e.g., in the areas of employment contract, wage and benefits, working hours, leave and reast, occupational safety and health, social protection, and worker' representation and social dialogue) in such policies/agreements.

**SUPPORTING ENTERPRISES, JOBS AND INCOMES**

The covid-19 pandemic has hit thousands of enterprises, millions of jobs have been disappeared, millions of workers' income has been affected. A sustainable recovery from this situation is needed to avoid long-term depression. To this end, the following strategic actions are needed to avoid the shutdown of enterprises, prevent job losses and stop wage/income fall.

**Support for enterprises in the sectors most affected and for workers and households facing job and income losses.**

***Supporting enterprises***

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are about 78 lakh SMEs in Bangladesh, with 25 million workers working in the SME sector<sup>76</sup>. Enterprises are suffering greatly due to the pandemic. A BIDS report claims that there has been an overall 66 per cent decrease in revenue in the SME sector (FY2019-20)<sup>77</sup>. In order to save jobs and preventing permanent business

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<sup>76</sup> The Daily Star, Supporting small and medium enterprises through the Covid-19 pandemic, Online discussion, 3 September 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/round-tables/news/supporting-small-and-medium-enterprises-through-the-covid-19-pandemic-1955173>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

closures supports for these enterprises in the form of various types of relief, including financial and tax relief is required. Enhancing access to credit for SME entrepreneurs must be part of the supports provided to enterprises. Special provisions of SME credits should also need to be introduced.

#### ***Employment retention measures***

Adoption of effective employed retentions measures is required. Although wage subsidies are widely used means in this regard, retention measures should be implemented in an integrated manner and with active labour market policies. The measures are to be linked with the provision of new training opportunities (skilling and re-skilling) for workers. The retention measures further need to emphasize sectors linked to agriculture and livelihood security, automation and digitalization that continue to displace workers.

#### ***Direct support to workers and working poor households***

Wage subsidies, temporary suspensions of tax payments and making access to various forms of business support and distribution of public resources (including land) must be made conditional on the retention of workers, on creation of productive and decent employment, on formalization of job, and skills development. Incentives should also be focused on: (a) avoiding and reducing vulnerability, especially for women, persons with disabilities, young people, migrant workers and other groups (e.g., families providing child care); and (b) forced transition to new sectors and occupations as well as new forms of work, and the opportunity to be (re)trained, build digital skills and capabilities that help cope with the labour market changes and transition.

#### ***Targeted policies for hard-hit groups***

Women, youth, older persons, refugees and migrants are among the hard-hit groups. Following actions are required for these group of people.

#### ***Targeted employment policies and programmes***

It is to be mentioned that many of the policy measures already taken do not reach the most vulnerable groups adequately. More than 140 programmes/schemes are available under the broad umbrella of SSNP. Despite these programmes, millions of people have remained out of the coverage of the safety nets. On the other hand, few of the existing schemes target the employment generation. Therefore, targeted employment policies are needed for the hard-hit groups. Emphasis should be given to the informal economy. Programmes like public works programme and employment guarantee schemes could be the effective policy in this regard. While designing these programmes, local and community-based initiatives need to be emphasized to address the specific need quickly.

#### ***Ensuring a decent minimum wage floor***

Many of the hard-hit groups have lost the job, and for many others, the income/wage has collapsed leaving them under a great vulnerability. To prevent the wage deflation of the hard-hit groups determining/fixing a decent national minimum wage floor would be instrumental. The national minimum wage must be set at a level that ensure decent living of workers along with their families.

## **Extension of social protection coverage and outreach**

*Well-designed and comprehensive social protection measures are required to combat the Covid-19 consequences on jobs and income and the resultant vulnerabilities.*

The comprehensive social protection measures must ensure universal access to social protection systems. Following components/elements must be there: *Firstly*, social protection floors that would incorporate access to health care, education, housing; *Secondly*, social insurance and assistance focusing health protection, unemployment protection, sickness benefits, and old age benefit; and *Thirdly*, extending social protection to previously uncovered groups like working poor and underemployed and the newly vulnerable population around closed industries, e.g. the retrenched/terminated workers.

*Migrants and refugees should be integrated to ensure solidarity in social insurance coverage and in the provision of socio-economic support.*

In order to make the social-economic support more inclusive special attention is needed to find out the excluded sections. Migrants and refugees are such sections that are the least heard/attended. However, the pandemic has had an enormous impact on them. Studies show that returnee migrants are passing through several adversities. A very recent study reveals that 47% of the returnees, who came back due to covid-19, could not manage any work, and many of them have borrowed either from other family members or from their relatives<sup>78</sup>. In this regard, support to migrant workers in the form of reintegration measures must be put in place. A database of all migrants and returnee migrants need to be established. The issues of migrant workers need to be incorporated in the social insurance and other socio-economic support packages.

## **PROTECTING WORKERS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Despite the Covid-19 outbreak, millions of workers have been continuing to work to keep the economy moving. Following strategies/actions are required to ensure a safe workplace for those who are at work.

### **Strengthen occupational safety and health measures and promote the implementation of public health measures in workplaces**

*Declaration of occupational diseases, OSH related laws to be made applicable for all formal and informal sectors and professionals.*

Covid-19 has opened a new discussion about the occupational disease and public health concerns. It is a public health issue, as well as it has an occupational disease related aspects. Many of the employees have been infected while performing their duties. Employees and staff of the health care sector, employees of law enforcement agencies, and workers and staff of banking sectors are the prominent examples. Therefore, considering the emerging situations, it is needed to review and prepare the list of the diseases that could be declared as occupational diseases, and also set occupational safety standards. At the same time, emphasis should be

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<sup>78</sup>BRAC migration survey, 2021, reported in the daily Star, May 1, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh/news/nearly-half-returnee-migrant-workers-remain-jobless-study-2086549>

given to the implementation of OSH related provisions. In this regard, measures must be taken to protect workers in every workplace, including formal and informal sectors.

#### ***Ensure access to vaccination, counseling for the psycho-social impact, and compulsory health insurance***

Even amid the pandemic, workers have contributed and have been contributing to keeping the economy running. It is urgently needed to bring all workers under inoculation. Moreover, several studies have explored that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought serious consequences for mental health. The work pattern of most workers has changed substantially. Arrangements for psycho-social counselling for the workers at every workplace is needed to address the mental health impact of the pandemic. Besides, considering the economic condition and future vulnerabilities/adversities, initiatives are needed to bring all the workers under the health insurance coverage. It has been observed that the treatment is costly for which workers often cannot afford it. Moreover, the costs have been more during the pandemic; diagnostic test fees have also increased significantly. Health insurance is thus a dire need for the workers.

#### ***Protection measures from occupational diseases, Healthy & secured workplace.***

To ensure protection for the workers against occupational diseases and achieve a healthy and secured workplace, specific and pragmatic actions are needed.

***Activate safety committee (Factory based, similar industries) with participation of people (for area based):*** Labour law has introduced a provision for forming safety committees at all workplaces where 50 or more workers are employed. These committees are responsible for looking after safety-related issues and ensuring a safe workplace. However, in reality, it has been observed that most workplaces lack such committees, even if where the committee exists, it does not function properly. Expansion and activation of these safety committees at workplaces are needed. On the other hand, beyond the workplaces, an area-based safety committee could be formed at the community level. These committees enlisting participation from local people can play a role in taking health protection measures.

***Industrial area-based Isolation center and regular checkup:*** Industries are concentrated in several clusters/areas. Likewise, the concentration of the workers is also high in those locations. Thus, it would be of great benefit to establish an industrial area-based isolation centre with adequate facility/arrangement. These isolation centres would be helpful to prevent a mass outbreak of the contagious disease in the workers' neighbourhood. There are also needs of having arrangements of regular health checkup of the workers, both at the factory level and in the community set-up.

***Safe transportation and accommodation:*** During the pandemic situation, the issue of social distancing was much-talked-about. Social distancing is needed everywhere. It has been observed that the transports the workers use do not maintain the social distancing primarily. On the other hand, amid lockdown when factories and offices were opened, there were governmental instructions to employers to arrange transport for all workers. However, the instructions have not been mainly implemented; the workers had to go to the workplaces using unsafe transport. On the other hand, considering the socio-economic circumstances, it has been

observed that maintaining social distancing at the living places is next to impossible, particularly for the low-income earners. Therefore, the trade union should bring these safe transport and accommodation issues as one of their top agendas.

**Establishing/Transforming welfare center into medical facilities for workers:** The labour welfare centres under the DoL need to be made fully functional. Although these centres are mandated to provide several health and family welfare-related services, most centres suffer from many limitations, including human resources and logistics. Proper initiatives of revitalizing these centres should be taken as a priority. At the same time number of such centre need to increase considering the concentration of workers in different areas/locations of the country.

### **Adapt work arrangements**

**Shift work (social distance) and remote/Tele working where possible:** The covid-19 pandemic has introduced the labour force with various new types of work arrangement. “Work from home” has been a new edition in the country. Besides, the instances of remote/teleworking have increased significantly globally as well as in Bangladesh. On the other hand, to maintain social distancing, some factories /workplaces have also introduced a shift system. However, all these also have serious concerns/implications for the working people, particularly on their working hours and work-life balance, mental stress, and physical health. Trade unions need to focus on these new shifts and fix appropriate strategies/actions to adapt to the situation.

**Expand access to leave & rest, and maternity protection:** While the new work arrangements have evolved, it requires focusing on the issues like leave and rest. Some imbalances have been observed during the pandemic in the areas of leave, rest and working hours. These issues need to be addressed adequately, which may be a challenge also for the unions. Besides, it is also needed to expand maternity protection. The discrepancies that now exist between private and public sector needs to be eliminated. Further, strategies/policies are needed to bring maternity protection to the millions of women workers in the informal sector.

### **Prevent discrimination and exclusion**

Labour market discriminations have many faces and enter through different avenues. Formal-informal, men-women, children-adult, public-private are some of the paths/means through which discriminations are manifested. The biggest proportion of Bangladesh’s working population continues to earn its livelihood in the informal economy. Generally, women, youth, older people, minorities, migrant workers, indigenous people face discrimination and exclusion. It has been observed that women, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, migrant workers, and those in the informal economy are being disadvantaged due to the pandemic and its aftermath. Further, the crisis possibly can exacerbate unacceptable forms of work, such as child labour and forced labour. To mitigate such risks following are some considerable actions that trade unions need to take into account.

### **Enforcement of law and polices**

It is essential to enhance and enforce laws and policies on equality and non-discrimination in all employment, private and public sector. The constitution of the country declares its non-

discriminatory policies to its citizens. The labour law also incorporates a provision to eliminate workplace discrimination, which though not adequate. On the other hand, the women development policy and the labour policy also have included provisions to address discriminations. Attention should be given to the effective implementation of these laws and policies.

#### **Activate anti-harassment committee**

Workplaces are not free from harassments. Verbal, psychological, physical and sexual are common forms of workplace harassment. It has been observed that women become the victim of these harassments disproportionately in most cases. The pandemic has also impacted the harassment condition. Mainly, verbal and psychological harassment incidences may increase heavily due to pandemic. To prevent workplace harassments, anti-harassment committees may exert a pivotal role. However, evidence shows that these committees are not functional in the majority of workplaces. Trade unions need to focus on the required policies and actions to make the anti-harassment committees a viable option to address harassments.

#### **RELYING ON SOCIAL DIALOGUE**

Social dialogue has a crucial role in resolving problems and crises that emerge in work-related spheres. The pandemic has brought new problems and crises and also has exposed the already-existing crises more overtly. Unions then need to take the opportunity of the potentials of social dialogue to address the pre-existing and newly evolved crises.

#### **Strengthen social dialogue on conditions of work and employment**

The scope of social dialogue is multifarious. Among the several issues, conditions of work and employment must be in a central position in social dialogue. Dialogue must incorporate the issues of quality and sustainability of the jobs. In this regard, trade unions need to emphasise dialogue and enhance their capacity so that they can influence the dialogue effectively.

#### **Free, independent, strong and representative organizations are prerequisites for effective social dialogue**

The goal of social dialogue is to promote effective consensus-building among the key stakeholders. It ultimately depends on mutual trust and respect among the actors of dialogue. Free, independent, strong and representative organizations are prerequisites for effective social dialogue, thus required to be promoted in all establishments. Also, how the actors are selected for the dialogue and how independently they could perform their roles are essential since the actors' level of representativeness influences exerting due functions and the outcomes of the dialogue. Therefore, for effective social dialogue, the trade union should focus on the condition/situation of dialogue and the role of the actors involved in this process, emphasizing *free, independent, strong and representative organizations*.

#### **Extend coverage for Freedom of Association & Collective Bargaining**

Due to the pandemic, new issues and concerns have emerged in the world of work. Social distancing at the workplace, emphasizing sanitary practices at the workplace are newly emerged concerns. Besides, the pandemic has also exposed the already existed vulnerabilities more openly, e.g., employment insecurities, income uncertainties, absence of social protection.

Under these circumstances, TUs should rethink and broaden their existing activities/programmes/policies and bargaining agendas. At the same time, they should focus on new programmes/policies and identify new issues for bargaining in the changing context.

#### **Enhance unions influence in both the national socio-economic sphere and in bargaining**

Unions must engage their effort to increase their capacity to influence policies and desiccations. Unions inherent strength is vital in this regard. Weak unions cannot exercise an influential role in the social and economic life of a society. On the other hand, a union's strength depends on its membership, members' role, organizing strategy, extend of activities and services, and its network and solidarity partnership.

**Increased member reach, member participation (contribution) and servicing:** The power of trade unions depends on the rate of union membership. Union density is also one of the crucial determining factors of bargaining power as well as bargaining outcomes. In order to increase the bargaining power and make employers more responsive to workers' issues, unions must prioritize enlisting/recruiting more members. Efforts are also needed to ensure member' contribution to the unions. In responses, unions need to provide timely and adequate services. Unions need to realize and assess the needs of members to design activities/service.

**Alliances between unions and civil society groups:** Solidarity is strength. TUs must prioritize to extend their collaboration with other unions. Initiatives must be taken to develop a partnership with the national level federation and global unions. At the same time, collaboration is needed with civil society groups and labour and human rights organizations. As a whole, a more robust network and solidarity would contribute to enhancing unions strength.

**Internationalization of union activity:** Despite exceptions, the issues of the workers have similarities all over the world. On the other hand, international and supra-national bodies and the stakeholders abroad often influence domestic policymaking. Therefore, TUs should emphasise and have strategies to bring their activities/policies into the international arena.

#### **Enhance enforcement of labour law through DIFE, DoL and Institutional capacity building**

Considering the pandemic-induced changed realities in industrial and labour relations, new strategies should be adopted to enforce the labour law effectively. Active enforcement efforts are needed from the side of the government. In this regard, proactive "investigation driven" enforcement rather than reacting to complaints (as in the fire-brigade approach) should be introduced. Efficient institutions and processes are essential in this regard. Further, this requires capacity enhancement of institutions like MoLE, DoI, DIFE.

#### **Ensuring workers' access to justice and effective judiciary**

Following actions/steps are required so that workers get access to justice and get complete protection against violation of their legal rights as workers:

- Expanding labour court's reach and scope and revising and strengthening the penalty structure;
- Making ADR an effective alternative to long-running cases; and
- Formalising the arbitration process.

### ***Strengthen TCC and make tripartite bodies functional***

TCC needs to play a vital role in social dialogue. However, many issues are affecting the TCC to exert its due role. The issues include its formation process, power asymmetry, member selection process and their tenure, frequency of meetings and issues for discussion, and finally, decision-making and workers participation in the process. To make TCC an effective platform of social dialogue and to strengthening its role amid the consequences of the pandemic, the said issues need to be addressed.

### ***Sector wise bipartite or tripartite forums***

Trade unions should focus on the establishment of tripartite forums for different sectors. At the same time, initiatives should be taken to develop bipartite forums to discuss and resolve workplace-related problems/issues.

### ***Forming sector wise TCC, legitimate and with authority***

At present, except for RMG, there is no TCC in other sectors. Establishing sector-wise TCC could be a vital instrument/vehicle to address sectors specific issues timely and effectively. While forming these TCCs, their scope, authority and legitimate power should be determined. It would be essential also to formulate an SOP for these TCCs.



## Annex 1: List of key informants

Date: 12 September 2020

Venue: Asia Hotel and Resorts, Dhaka

Name	Designation	Organization
Md. Anwar Hosain	President	Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Shramik Dol
Fazlul Haque Montu	President	Jatiya Sramik League
Sahidullah Chowdhury	President	Bangladesh Trade Union Centre
Md. Abdul Wahed	Working President	Jatiya Sramik Jote
Md. Rafiqul Islam Rafique		Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Shramik Dol
Pulok Ranjan Dhar	Secretary	Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress
Rajekuzzaman Ratan	President	Samajtantrik Sramik Front
Ahsan Habib Bulbul	Secretary	Samajtantrik Sramik Front
Chowdhury Ashiqul Alam	Secretary General	Bangladesh Trade Union Sangha
Adv. Md. Delower Hosain Khan	General Secretary	Bangladesh Labour Faderation
Md. Quamrul Ahsan	Acting President	Jatiya Sramik Fadaration
Mesbahuddin Ahmed	President	Jatiya Sramik Jote
Ashraful Islam		Jatiya Sramik League
Saifuzzaman Badsha	President	Jatiya Sramik Jote Bangladesh
Shah Md. Abu Zafor	President	Bangladesh Labour Federation
Naimul Ahsan Jewel	Member Secretary	National Coordination Centre for Workers Education (NCCWE)
Md. Khorshed Alam		Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Sramik Dal
Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir	Chairman Department of Development Studies	University of Dhaka
A. K. M Masum Ul Alam	OSH Consultant	
Dr. Salamat Khondokar	Professor Department of Public Health	Daffodil International University
Shakil Akter Chowdhury	Coordinator	
Kohinoor Mahmood	Director	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies- BILS

Date: 17 January 2021

Venue: BILS Seminar Hall, Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Name	Designation	Organization
Abul Kalam Azad		Bangladesh Trade Union Centre
Md. Abdul Wahed	Working President	Jatiya Sramik Jote
Md. Quamrul Ahsan	Acting President	Jatiya Sramik Fadaration
Shamim Ara	President	Bangladesh Jatiya Sramik Federation
Rajekuzzaman Ratan	President	Samajtantrik Sramik Front
Mohammad Khorshed Alam		Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Sramik Dal
Saifuzzaman Badsha	President	Jatiya Sramik Jote Bangladesh
Sayeda Azizun Nahar	Vice President	Bangladesh Labour Federation
Pulok Ranjan Dhar	Secretary	Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress
Shakil Akter Chowdhury	Consultant	
Kohinoor Mahmood	Director	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies- BILS
Nazma Yesmin	Director	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies- BILS

Date: 6 February 2021

Venue: BILS Seminar Hall, Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Name	Designation	Organization
Naimul Ahsan Jewel	Member Secretary	National Coordination Centre for Workers Education (NCCWE)
Md. Quamrul Ahsan	Acting President	Jatiya Sramik Fadaration
Chowdhury Ashikul Alam	Secretary General	Bangladesh Trade Union Sangha
Pulok Ranjan Dhar	Secretary	Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress
Mohammad Khorshed Alam		Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Sramik Dal
Abul Kalam Azad		Bangladesh Trade Union Centre
Sayeda Azizun Nahar	Vice President	Bangladesh Labour Federation
Khalekuzzaman Lipon	Organizing Secretary	Socialist Labour Front
Shamim Ara	Presidnet	Bangladesh Jatio Sramik Federation
Mesbahusddin Ahmed	President	Jatiya Sramik Jote
K.M. Azam Khashru	General secretary	Jatiya Sramik League
Nur Kutub Alam Mannan	Acting Presidnet	Jatio Sramik League
Saifuzzaman Badsha	President	Jatio Sramik Jote Bangladesh
Shakil Akter Chowdhury	Consultant	
Kohinoor Mahmood	Director	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies- BILS

Date: 18 February 2021

Venue: Asia Hotel and Resorts, Dhaka

Name	Designation	Organization
Naimul Ahsan Jewel	Member Secretary	National Coordination Centre for Workers Education (NCCWE)
Shah Md. Abu Zafor	President	Bangladesh Labour Federation
Rajekuzzaman Ratan	President	Samajtantrik Sramik Front
Md. Quamrul Ahsan	Acting President	Jatio Sramik Fadaration
Md. Anawar Hosain	President	Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Shramik Dal
Saifuzzaman Badsha	President	Jatiya Sramik Jote Bangladesh
Md. Alauddin Mia	Working President	Jatiya Sramik League
Chowdhury Ashiqsul Alam	Secretary General	Bangladesh Trade Union Sangha
Pulok Ranjan Dhar	Secretary	Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress
Md. Iqbal Chowdhury	Working President	Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress
Mesbahuddin Ahmed	President	Jatiya Sramik Jote
Sohidullah Chowdhury	President	Bangladesh Trade Union Centre
Saleh Ahmed	Join Secretary	Jatiya Sramik jote
Md. Rafik		Bangladesh Jatio Sramik federation
Mohammad Khorshed Alam		Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Sramik Dal
Shamim Ara		Bangladesh Jatio Sramik Forum
SM Ahsan Habib	General Secretary	Socialist Labour Front
K.M. Azam Khashru	General secretary	Jatiya Sramik League
Sayeda Azizun Nahar	Vice President	Bangladesh Labour Federation
Dr. Wajedul Islam Khan	Secretary General	Bangladesh Trade Union Centre
Shakil Akter Chowdhury	Consultant	
Nazma Yesmin	Director	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies- BILS
Kohinoor Mahmood	Director	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies- BILS